

Re-examining ESL Programs in Public Schools: A Focus on Creole-English Children's Clause-Structuring Strategies in Written Academic Discourse

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Abstract

The goal of the study was to compare the literacy challenges faced by children who speak nonstandard dialects of English and for whom Standard English is a *second dialect* with challenges faced by children for whom Standard English is a *second language*. The study focused on the extent to which discourse patterns in the Creole-English speech community and, concomitantly, in the children's linguistic repertoire, are reflected in their registers of academic writing. More specifically, the study examined how challenges related to clause structure (a register feature of academic writing) manifest themselves in Creole-English children's writing compared with the clause-structuring challenges faced by ESL children. Findings indicated that Creole-English-speaking children used more paratactic-hypotactic clause structures typical of spoken or conversational discourse in their writing than their ESL counterparts. The linguistic structure of English-based Creoles as well as the particularities of the creole continuum were purported to contribute to the higher frequency of paratactic and hypotactic clauses in the Creole-English children's academic expository essays.

Introduction

In the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, Caribbean English-based Creoles are the most common nonstandard dialects of English¹ in schools due to the increasing rate of migration from the Anglophone Caribbean. Therefore, ESL professionals in these countries are now coming in contact with immigrant children for whom standard English is *not* English as a second language *but* English as a second dialect. For these children, Standard English is *neither* a native nor nonnative language but a second dialect. They are classified as such because their native languages, English-based Creoles or Creole-English varieties generally correspond to Standard English at the lexical level but diverge considerably from the Standard at the morphological and syntactic levels. Because teachers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom are not familiar with the structure of Creole-English varieties, children who speak these varieties are placed in ESL classes designed for children who are nonnative speakers of English. This misplacement is due to the fact that English-language programs found in

public schools in the above-mentioned countries represent a dichotomy - one for children who are *native* speakers of English and the other for children who are *nonnative* speakers English, i.e., children who are ESL learners. This dichotomy is problematic in

that it has historically marginalized and excluded one of the largest populations of speakers of nonstandard dialects of English in the schools, namely, Creole-English-speaking children. Therefore, these children's linguistic experiences are not recognized and their literacy needs are usually not attended to (Clachar, 2003).

This study takes the position that Creole-English children exhibit different literacy challenges than do children who are ESL learners. Thus, the misplacement of Creole children in ESL classes may compound their difficulties related to academic writing skills. In order to address this postulation as well as to facilitate international research in the area of ESL and ESD², the study focused on Creole-English and ESL children in the United States with the future goal of including a similar population of immigrant children in the metropolitan area of Toronto in Canada. I report findings of the study which examined the different ways in which Creole-English-speaking immigrant children and ESL children grapple with the register features of academic discourse, specifically, the clause structure of academic discourse. I explored clause structure, as a register feature of academic school-based writing, because it is related to choices at the clause level which, in turn, influence the entire textual organization of academic writing (Halliday, 1994). In addition, clause structure is construed in certain *lexical* and *grammatical* resources of language and the ability to use the appropriate resources may have far-reaching challenges for Creole-English speaking children

acquiring register features of academic writing due to the fact that the *lexical* overlap found in

Creole **English** and Standard **English** often disguises fundamental *grammatical* differences between the creole and the standard (Craig, 1998). Thus, this phenomenon tends to mask the *lexical* and *grammatical* features that distinguish spoken discourse (Creole-English varieties occur predominantly in spoken discourse) from written academic discourse. As a result, Creole-English-speaking children may face unique challenges acquiring the subtle but pervasive lexical and grammatical features that define the registers of written academic writing. Children who are nonnative speakers of English, that is, children who are ESL learners, are *not* likely to face such challenges because their native languages such as Spanish, French-based Creoles (such as Haitian Creole), Arabic, Vietnamese, and Farsi, etc., do not have lexical overlap with Standard English.

Registers : Rationale For Their Use The Study

In order to produce a well-written task, students need to have a clear notion of the textual form that this written task will assume and they need to master the lexical and grammatical resources that reflect the textual form. These requirements are captured by the concept *register*. Register refers to the configuration of lexical and grammatical resources that define particular uses of languages (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1992; Ball, 2004). “Registers vary because what we do with language varies from context to context” (Schleppegrell, 2001, p.432). Therefore, register differences manifest themselves through different lexical and grammatical resources that language users

choose as they respond to the demands of various writing tasks. It follows then that some registers are suitable for tasks typical of informal spoken discourse and some registers are appropriate for tasks characteristic of written academic discourse. The production of academic writing lies in the hidden and complex challenge of moving from the lexical and grammatical resources typical of the registers of speech to those resources typical of the registers of academic discourse. In Standard English, the resources which distinguish registers of spoken discourse from academic discourse are subtle but pervasive. The tendency, therefore, is for non-proficient writers to transfer speech registers into their academic writing (Van Lancker-Sidtis & Rallon, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2001).

Research Questions

As stated earlier, the study examined how Creole-English children grapple with one of the register features of academic discourse - *clause structure*. More specifically, the study aimed at finding out what develops in the development of academic writing produced by children who speak a nonstandard dialect of English (in this case, Creole English) with respect to : (1) the influence of the Creole-English speech community and, thus, the linguistic repertoire of Creole-English-speaking children on the acquisition of clause structure typical of registers of academic discourse; (2) a comparison of clause-structuring strategies used by Creole-English speaking children with those used by ESL children in academic expository writing; and (3) implications for classroom instruction. The aims of the study are depicted in the following research questions:

Research Question 1 : To what extent are the discourse patterns in the Creole-English speech community and, concomitantly, Creole-English-speaking children's linguistic repertoire, reflected in the children's registers of academic writing?

Research Question 2: How do challenges related to clause structure manifest themselves in Creole-English-speaking children's written academic discourse compared with the clause-structure challenges faced by ESL children?

Research Question 3 : How can the findings from the study inform teachers of the linguistic complexity of academic writing? How does this complexity differ with respect to the challenges faced by Creole-English-speaking children versus ESL children?

Design Of The Study

The design of the study included six components which were ultimately combined to address the above research questions. The first component provided background information on the *discourse patterns of the Creole-English speech community* and thus, Creole-English children's linguistic repertoire, since the study adopts the socio-cognitive notion of literacy that children's interactional experiences and cultural bases of discourse patterns in their speech communities are related to the cognitive aspects of writing. An understanding of the discourse features in the Anglophone Caribbean is important for another reason: The children's predominant speech patterns are likely to exhibit varying degrees of creole influence on the acquisition of registers of academic writing - a phenomenon which must be accounted for when analyzing the children's writing samples. The second component discussed how lexical and grammatical resources are used to construct *clause structure* that is expected

in academic writing. More specifically, it discusses the ways in which registers of spoken discourse differ from registers of written academic discourse with respect to clause-structuring strategies. The third component, *the method*, described some of the prominent linguistic features of Creole-English varieties which were used to classify the children's speech patterns. This information was extremely crucial in assessing the extent to which varying degrees of creole features in the children's speech are likely to affect their acquisition of clause structure known to be characteristic of registers of academic writing. The fourth component, *coding of data*, focused on how the clauses in the children's writing samples were coded in order to carry out the analysis of the data and address the research questions stated above. The fifth component, *analysis of data and discussion of findings* focused on the manner in which challenges related to clause structure manifest themselves in Creole-English-speaking children's written academic discourse as well as the extent to which the discourse patterns in the Creole-English speech community were reflected in the children's registers of academic writing. These challenges were then compared with those faced by ESL children. The sixth component, *implications for classroom instruction*, discussed how the findings gleaned from the analysis of written data produced by both Creole-English-speaking and ESL children can be used to inform teachers about the subtle but pervasive linguistic complexities of clause structure related to academic discourse as well as how to address the differences in clause-structuring strategies used by the two ethnolinguistic groups. The remainder of this study will be devoted to each of the six components.

Discourse Patterns Of The Creole-English Speech Community

English-based Creoles or Creole-English varieties in the Caribbean correspond to Standard English at the lexical level but diverge from Standard English at the grammatical level. In addition, Caribbean English-based Creoles operate in a sociolinguistic environment where there is a great deal of interaction between the standard variety of English and the conservative creole. As a result, the linguistic repertoire of Creole-English speakers has been characterized by what DeCamp (1971) calls a creole continuum indicative of tremendous variability as speakers move back and forth between the two typologically and genetically distinct languages, that is, the English-based Creole or the Creole-English variety and Standard English. It is important to point out that the notion of the creole continuum has not been without controversy. Over the past two decades there have been disagreements voiced by linguists regarding the appropriateness of the term “continuum” to describe the Angolphone Caribbean or the English-speaking Caribbean communities (e.g., Antigua, Guyana, Jamaica, Tobago). This study endorses the creole continuum to describe these English-speaking Caribbean communities as accurate and theoretically sound due to the fact that there is a continuous transitional range of lectal varieties “representing the fusion and interaction of varying subsystems which exhibits no clear lines of demarcation” between the conservative creole and the local variety of Standard English (Rickford, 1987, p. 18). In other words, there is no clear-cut division between the creole and the Standard.

What is unusual and interesting about the creole continuum is that there is a spectrum of speech varieties ranging from the conservative creole (*the basilect*), to the intermediate creolized varieties (*the mesolect*), to the standard variety of English (*the acrolect*), a phenomenon which gives rise to a great deal of linguistic fluidity, that is, any

variable, whether it be phonological, morphological, or syntactic, can have as its variants, features that are identifiable with the conservative creole variety (basilectal features), features identified with the Standard English variety (acrolectal), and several other intermediate variants diagnostic of the mid-range zone of the continuum (mesolectal features). Concomitantly, in a single conversational exchange, Creole-English speakers are likely to use a combination of linguistic features which are identifiable with the creole (the basilect), linguistic features identifiable with the intermediate creolized varieties of English (the mesolect), and features which are typical of the Standard English variety (the acrolect) (Alleyne, 1980). For example, a Creole-English speaker will sometimes use *mi ben kom*, sometimes *mi did kom*, *mi kom*, or *mi kyem* (“I came”). The same speaker will variably use *mi a kom* alongside *mi da kom*, *mi komin*, *a komin*, or *aim komin* (“I am coming”). Thus, there is a considerable amount of bidirectional style shifting along the creole continuum, a factor which causes Creole-English-speaking children to have difficulties building a separate mental representation for Standard English because of the blurred boundaries between the English-based Creole and Standard English. Two ramifications stem from this. First, Creole-English speakers (like speakers of other nonstandard dialects of English such as African-American Vernacular English) may believe that they already know Standard English and thus, may not be motivated to confine themselves to Standard English patterns in their writing. Second, they may not recognize new English features taught to them such as register features of academic writing, and thus, they may fail to use them. Such literacy concerns are not typical of ESL children. In examining and comparing the clause-structuring strategies of Creole-English-speaking children with those of ESL children, the study highlighted an

oversight in the ESL curriculum in the public school system in the United States - that of viewing English-language programs as either for native speakers of English or for nonnative speakers of English, that is, ESL learners. By examining clause-structuring strategies used by Creole-English-speaking children and ESL children, this study intends to show that Creole-English children who are neither native nor nonnative speakers of English represent a separate category of students, a category of students whose literacy needs cannot be addressed by an ESL curriculum, but by one that attends to their specific writing challenges.

Clause Structure As A Register Feature Of Written Academic Discourse

Halliday (1982) submits that texts and clauses have similar properties, stating that “no one clause can recapitulate the whole text, but all contribute, and some achieve a remarkable likeness, because the systems of the clause embody all the semantic components from which the text is built in a way that allows infinite variety ” (p.230). In other words, by examining the challenges associated with the students’ use of clause-level structures typical of academic discourse one can gain insight into the way these challenges are reflected in the textual organization of academic discourse and the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in moving from conversational registers to written academic registers. Therefore, the main goal of this study was to observe and compare how Creole-English and ESL children grappled with unfamiliar register features at the clause level which, in turn, reflected the academic quality of their written texts.

In spoken language, clauses are structured so that they are chained together in succession, in the form of coordinate clauses, frequently leading to very long utterances. Therefore, the writer who uses a strategy of clause-chaining, linking hypotactic and

paratactic clauses (explained below) to form “longer sentences, realizes a more oral register” (Colombi, 2002, p.70). On the other hand, in written language, the writer who uses a strategy that structures clauses so that they are embedded, typically employs a more academic register. Thus, clause structure is a crucial register feature of academic expository writing and must be addressed in order to understand the underlying subtle challenges facing emergent writers. This study focused on four types of clauses described by Halliday (1994). They are: (a) the main clause which introduces a paratactic sequence or the dominant clause in a hypotactic clause relationship; (b) the hypotactic clause which is dependent on another clause but does not assume an integral role in that clause, examples are adverbial clauses, clauses expressed through verbs of thinking or saying, and nonrestrictive relative clauses; (c) the paratactic clause which is linked to the main clause by a coordinating conjunction; and (d) the embedded clause, which unlike the hypotactic clause, is dependent on another clause and is an integral part of that clause, examples of such clauses are restrictive relative clauses, comparative clauses, and complementizer clauses. Table 1 shows sentences with the different types of clauses.

Recent developments in the area of text analysis have submitted that by focusing on clause linkages through hypotaxis, parataxis and embedding, we can identify important distinctions between registers of conversational discourse and registers of academic text. For example, Schleppegrell and Colombi (1997, p.488) have convincingly demonstrated that by looking at paratactic and hypotactic clauses together and by distinguishing them from embedded clauses, researchers are able to move “beyond the category of subordinate clause and make a finer distinction between clauses that independently contribute to discourse structure (hypotactic and paratactic) and those that function as part of another clause (embeddings).” This distinction is borne out by analyzing the two types of relative clause - restrictive and nonrestrictive. As stated earlier, restrictive relative clauses are typical of embedded clauses whereas nonrestrictive relative clauses are characteristic of hypotactic clauses. The following examples (taken from the writing samples of children who participated in the study) clarify the distinction:

- 1) The constant errors in the handbook annoyed the meticulous teacher,
 who would spend a lot of time revising the materials.
- 2) I sent the video to my brother **who** works in New Jersey.

According to Halliday (1994), both of the *who* subordinate clauses appear to give the illusion of the same surface structure, however, a closer analysis reveals different meanings. In (1) the nonrestrictive relative clause does not describe “the meticulous teacher” in the same manner that the restrictive relative clause in (2) describes

“my brother.” Instead, the *who* clause in (1) provides further information about the teacher, whose identity is already noted. For this reason, hypotactic (nonrestrictive) relative clauses are not limited to the description of head nouns, as in (2) which is typical of embedded (restrictive) relative clauses. Therefore, the hypotactic relative clause is a device for extending ideas whereas the embedded relative clause is a device for limiting information to the head noun. It is clear that hypotactic clauses lead to elaborate and expanded clause complexes typical of oral registers while embedded clauses tend to constrain and compact information into lexically dense clauses typical of academic registers.

Hypothesized challenges related to the use of clause structure in written academic discourse

The power of the creole continuum lies in the ability it gives to mix *basilectal-mesolectal-acrolectal* varieties in contact (see section Discourse Features of the Creole Speech Community discussed above) not only to produce a very rich semantic system but, the ability it gives its speakers to engage in acts of identity, asserting through their language, both ethnic solidarity and distinctiveness (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985). Such richness might not be achieved as effectively with *one* variety alone. From the perspective of the acquisition of academic writing in Standard English, the mixing of these varieties due to the bidirectional shifting between Creole English (the *basilect* and the *mesolect*) and Standard English (the *acrolect*) can create a blurring of distinctness on the part of the Creole-English speaker as to what linguistic system belongs to Creole English on one hand, and what constitutes the linguistic system of Standard English on the other. A crucial point that must be brought to the fore in this study is the relevance of the creole and the creole continuum to the hypothesized effect on the development of

register features of academic writing by Creole-English-speaking children. Unlike Spanish, Russian, French, Vietnamese, etc, which are clearly very different languages from English, Creole English shows a *considerable vocabulary overlap* with Standard English but diverges from the Standard with respect to the morphological and syntactic systems. This phenomenon creates a blurring of distinctness or even confusion on the part of the Creole-English speaker between the linguistic system of the English-based Creole and that of Standard English (a phenomenon which is not likely to create challenges for ESL learners such as native speakers of Spanish, French, Russian, Haitian Creole, Farsi, Vietnamese ESL learners, etc.). As a result, the Creole-English speaker might have difficulty separating certain grammatical features that link paratactic and hypotactic clauses typical of Creole English (which occurs predominantly in spoken discourse) from the grammatical features that link main and embedded clauses typical of Standard English academic writing. Moreover, the bidirectional shifting between Creole English (the basilectal and mesolectal varieties) and Standard English (the acrolectal variety) creates a continuum space for mixing the Creole-English and the Standard-English varieties in contact. These varieties are not problematic in the oral mode but become extremely problematic in written academic English because they do not have full grammatical equivalents in the Standard English system (Youssef & James, 1999). Thus, in moving from registers that are typical of spoken discourse to the registers that are appropriate for written academic English, Creole-English-speaking children must learn to distinguish the oral mode that allows the mixing of the Creole **English** and the Standard **English** clause-structure-contact systems *from* the restricted clause-structuring strategies in the written Standard English mode - a task which is rather

difficult. This study, therefore, attempts to gain an understanding of the nature of writing challenges faced by Creole-English-speaking children, a unique and underrepresented group in the second-language-acquisition literature. Since the study purported to build on and advance the existing research which at present focuses only on ESL learners' writing difficulties, I compared the two ethnolinguistic groups regarding the challenges associated with their transfer of clause-structuring strategies typical of spoken /conversational discourse into their academic written discourse.

Method

Subjects

There were 80 high-school children (11th grade) in the study. This grade was selected because they represent the curricular period when children are being prepared for post-secondary education and academic writing skills become crucial. The findings gave me the opportunity to provide teachers with feedback on students' writing challenges during the following year when the students were in the 12th grade (the last grade of high school). The two public schools in South Florida which participated in the study have excellent professional development programs specifically structured to invite professors to share their research with both the teachers and students for the purpose of improving students' academic performance. 40 Creole-English-speaking children (speakers of Jamaican Creole, Guyanese Creole and Tobagonian Creole) and 40 ESL children (11 of whom are Arabic speakers, 14 Spanish speakers, and 15 Haitian Creole speakers) participated. All 80 children were enrolled in intermediate ESL classes based on their performance on oral and written placement tests. The study was designed to provide groundwork for future studies that will be carried out in the metropolitan area of

Toronto in Canada with similar immigrant populations. The long term goal is to build an international focus that purports to examine the development of academic expository prose from a sociocognitive perspective and to better understand how cognitive demands associated with register features of written academic discourse

(in this case, clause structure) are affected by the social context of natural language use.

The extent to which Creole-English-children, coming from an oral tradition³ draw on registers of spoken discourse in their academic expository writing will be compared with the writing of a more international group of ESL learners who are from literate traditions.

Classification of Creole-English Subjects

Based on the complexity of Creole-English speakers' language behaviors (see section on Discourse Patterns of the Creole Speech Community discussed above), it is necessary to classify the children according to their place along the creole continuum in an effort to better understand how their predominant speech patterns affect the acquisition of clause structure in the registers of written academic discourse. In order to classify the Creole-English children's speech according to the *basilectal-mesolectal-acrolectal* range of the continuum, I tape recorded and transcribed interviews with the 40 Creole-English speaking subjects. Each subject was interviewed for about an hour and for the purposes of classifying his/her speech, I used some of the morphological variables that have been consistently employed by scholars working with the creole-continuum data. These are the 1st person singular subject pronoun: *mi* (basilect), *a* (mesolect), *ai* (acrolect) as well as the progressive morpheme: *a ~ da + V* (basilect),

Vin ~ *Ving* (mesolect), and *aux* + *Ving* (acrolect) (Edwards, 1983; Winford, 1997). While there is extensive variation along the continuum, and no group of speakers exhibits categorical use of any particular variant, the degree of shifting from variety to another is restricted by the situational context, the interlocutors, the speakers' socioeconomic backgrounds, attitudes, as well as their exposure to and proficiency in the acrolectal variety (Winford, 1997). Since Creole-English speakers shift between varieties in response to the above-mentioned factors, the best way to classify the subjects was to rely on the frequency with which they used these morphological variants in the interviews. It must be pointed out that the purpose of the study was not intended to create three distinct lectal varieties since the creole continuum involves a significant degree of "intersystemic competence" in which speakers demonstrate the ability to shift from one variety to another based on sociolinguistic factors (Winford, 1997, p.265). For example, although some subjects showed a predominance of the basilectal *mi/a* ~ *da* + *V*, occurring at least two-thirds of the time, these subjects *also used* the mesolectal variants *a/Vin* ~ *Ving* and, therefore, were classified as basilectal-mesolectal. Mesolectal speakers used *a/Vin* ~ *Ving* at least 66% of the time. Speakers whose speech showed mesolectal features, but exhibited the acrolectal variants *ai/aux* + *Ving* at least 66% of the time were classified as mesolectal-acrolectal. Of the children who participated in the study, 13 were basilectal-mesolectal, 15 were mesolectal, and 12 were mesolectal-acrolectal. In order to establish interrater reliability, two graduate students of linguistics, who were native speakers of English-based Creoles, classified the speech samples independently. The researcher's classification of the interview samples concurred on 83 percent of the samples classified by each of the two raters.

Coding Of The Data

The study examined a total of 320 essays (4 for each child) which required the children to interpret, explain, expound on, and argue issues; the issues were raised in writing prompts given as class assignments. Clause structure was used as the focus of analysis due to the characteristics of expository genre. This type of genre generally requires clause structure typical of academic registers, that is, main and embedded rather than paratactic and hypotactic clause-chaining typical of speech registers. Thus, it seemed appropriate to use clause-structuring strategies as the indices of development of the children's writing, as they moved *from* registers which are more compatible with spoken discourse *to* registers compatible with academic expository prose. Each clause in the children's writing samples was coded according to the four types of clauses defined and discussed above, that is, (a) main clauses, (b) hypotactic clauses, (c) paratactic clauses, and (d) embedded clauses (following Halliday, 1994; Colombi, 2002). The goal was to examine and compare the degree to which Creole-English-speaking and ESL children used strategies of clause-chaining that linked paratactic and hypotactic clauses to form longer sentences characteristic of more oral registers, as well as the extent to which they employed main and embedded clauses, typical of academic prose.

Analysis Of Data And Discussion Of Findings

Research Question 1 : To what extent are the discourse patterns in the Creole-English speech community and, concomitantly, Creole-English-speaking children's linguistic repertoire, reflected in the children's registers of academic writing?

One of the most striking features in the Creole-English-speaking students' expository essays was the oral-based organizational patterns. The patterns were originally identified as circumlocution, narrative interspersion, and recursion by Ball (1992) when she examined the written texts of African-American adolescents, who are speakers of a nonstandard dialect of English, namely, African-American Vernacular English. One of these patterns, circumlocution, was also identified in the written data produced by 21 of the 40 Creole-English-speaking children in the study. Circumlocution is an orally-based organizational pattern which is marked by a lack of conjunctions other than "and" to connect anecdotes. The anecdotes are linked to a topical event or theme which is not explicitly stated and has to be extracted from a series of associated anecdotes. Thus, topical development is attained through "anecdotal association rather than linear description" (Ball, 1991, p.34). This pattern of circumlocution in writing is typical of conversational discourse in which interlocutors share a considerable amount of information about the speech event. Therefore, they can observe the effect of what they are saying on their co-participants, and if there is a breakdown in communication, they can negotiate meaning through interactional modification. In some cases, it was necessary to move outside of the children's texts and draw on my own background knowledge to find links among ideas in these segments of texts. Thus, the writer's lack of explicitness in circumlocution is characteristic of the speaker-listener collaboration which takes place in topic development in conversational discourse. Kutz (1986),

Shaughnessy (1977), and Whiteman (1981) have also submitted that students whose community language is a nonstandard dialect of English do draw heavily on oral language patterns in their academic writing, particularly because the mother tongue, i.e., the nonstandard variety of English, does not exist as a codified written form in a variety of literary genres so they do not have the opportunity to become sensitized to the register features of written language.

One feature of circumlocution is the strategy of clause chaining due to the linking of paratactic and hypotactic clauses to form longer sentences that realizes a more oral register instead of the more academic register in which the writer tends to utilize fewer clauses in each sentence, compressing more information into each clause and embedding subordinate clauses into main clauses. It is interesting to note that circumlocution was not found in any of the 40 ESL students' writing samples. Circumlocution, therefore, represented attempts on the part of Creole-English students to shape academic discourse according to the norms or the registers of oral language. What this observation appears to depict is the extent to which culturally-based differences in discourse patterns are reflected in the processes associated with the development of written academic discourse. In other words, Creole English, particularly the basilectal and mesolectal varieties, are used predominantly in spoken discourse, as a result, some oral cohesive devices within clauses which are typical of the basilectal and mesolectal varieties could not be translated easily by the students into expository prose due to such grammatical structures as serialization,⁴ culture-specific idiomatic expressions, and the lack of explicit

topic-progression devices. On the other hand, the ESL students have native languages (Arabic, Spanish, and Haitian Creole) which occur in written discourse.

One explanation for the appearance of circumlocution in more than fifty percent of the Creole-English-speaking students' writing may have been due to the fact that Creole English shows tremendous *vocabulary* overlap with Standard English and the basilectal and mesolectal varieties of Creole **English** allow for the mixing of the lexical and grammatical features of these varieties with those that are restricted to Standard **English**. Therefore, it is difficult for Creole English students to distinguish the lexical and grammatical features of clause structure typical of circumlocution in spoken registers from the lexical and grammatical features of clause structure typical of written academic registers restricted to Standard English. Examples of circumlocution were found in contexts where there were no explicit embedded clauses to link information to the main topic of a particular paragraph. Instead, the main topic had to be inferred from a series of associated anecdotes in the form of paratactic-hypotactic clause chaining, with shifts in topic marked lexically only by the use of "paratactic *and*."

Another explanation for the appearance of circumlocution in Creole-English-speaking students' writing may have been due to the fact that English-based Creoles are mainly oral dialects of English and the lack of a written frame of reference for the native Creole English denies the children the opportunity to become sensitized to a variety of registers typical of written discourse in their mother tongue. It should be noted that unlike Creole English-speaking students, Arabic-, Spanish-, and Haitian-Creole-speaking students had developed some literacy skills in their native languages and read the daily newspapers which are published in these three languages. Thus, they come in

contact with a variety of registers typical of written discourse in their native languages. Although the Arabic-, Spanish-, and Haitian-Creole speaking students faced challenges acquiring clause-structuring strategies required for academic registers (this issue will be discussed below), it was clear that they experienced less difficulty than their Creole-English-speaking counterparts. This observation is supported by Cummins (2000) and Hamilton (2001) who submit that literacy skills developed in the native language can be transferred to the second language. The following section which addresses **Research Question 2**, emphasizes the fact that clause structure is a crucial register feature of academic expository writing and must be addressed in order to understand the underlying, subtle challenges facing writers who are speakers of nonstandard dialects of English.

Research Question 2 : How do challenges related to clause structure manifest themselves in Creole-English-speaking children’s written academic discourse compared with the clause-structure challenges faced by ESL children?

One of the most fundamental constructs which appears to identify students’ development of appropriate register choices for written academic discourse is grounded in their ability to recognize and understand the pragmatic versus the semantic roles of conjunctions in clauses. In the discourse of conversation, the discourse-organizing role of conjunctions is to link paratactic and hypotactic clauses so that the pragmatic rather than the semantic meaning of the clause is emphasized. On the other hand, in *academic expository texts*, conjunctions are significant indicators of the semantic relationships between clauses and segments of the text, therefore, conjunctions are used to embed

subordinate clauses into main clauses in order to foreground propositional meaning . The above assertion was borne out very clearly when some conjunctions in the clauses in students' essays were examined. A case in point is the conjunction "but." Edmonson (1981) identifies certain functions of *but* such as *interactional countering but*, *topic resumption but*, *concession but*, and *but after disarmers* which are typical of spoken discourse but inappropriate for academic writing. When they appear in written discourse they are clearly recognized as transfer register features from conversational English. (Readers are directed to Edmonson (1981) for a discussion of the function of but in spoken discourse.) Due to space constraint, I will discuss only the function of *interactional countering but* and then illustrate from a student's written excerpt how this speech-typical conjunction was inappropriately transferred into the clause structure of written academic discourse. The function of *interactional countering but* causes the topic of a conversation to progress by means of a series of oppositional turn-taking strategies, that is the conjunction *but* is used as a turn-taking device to introduce an opposing view and thus, assumes a "countering function" (Edmonson, 1981, p.89). In this context, *but* plays the pragmatic role of countering or opposing the previous interlocutor's assertion and appears in a series of coordinated clauses - a phenomenon that is typical of conversational discourse but uncommon in academic writing. However, this function of *but* was found in the written data produced by many of the Creole-English-speaking children, particularly, those who were classified as basilectal-mesolectal speakers in this study, an indication of the tendency to draw on register resources of spoken discourse. Example 3 below shows the *interactional countering but*

linking paratactic-hypotactic clauses which, ideationally, stand in oppositional juxtaposition:

- (3) The system became better and better *but* the general public did not understand the educational reform in the correct manner, *but* I recognized it due to the fact that the students' grades in math and science were improved.

The occurrence of this type of speech-typical conjunction as well as *topic resumption but*, *concession but*, and *but after disarmers* to link paratactic and hypotactic clauses was 39% higher in Creole-English-speaking students' academic expository texts than in those of their ESL counterparts (Clachar, 2003 supports similar findings).

It will be remembered that the clauses used by each student were coded as main, hypotactic, paratactic, and embedded. The goal was to investigate the extent to which the students used the strategy of clause-chaining which links hypotactic and paratactic clauses to form longer sentences typical of a more oral register. This strategy was then compared with the more academic register in which a writer uses fewer clauses in each sentence, compressing larger amounts of information into each clause and *embedding* subordinate clauses into *main* clauses (see Eggins, 1994; Colombi, 2002).

The analysis of clause structure revealed that the hypotactic and paratactic clause-linking strategies occurred at a higher rate in the Creole-English students' essays than in those produced by their ESL counterparts. For example, clauses such as (4) and (5) were more prevalent in Creole-English children's writing samples than in those of the ESL children:

(4) Therefore, what is the reason for this ? (simple sentence)

I think it is because these government agencies have not
check the legality of the matter (hypotactic)

and do not want to deal with the problems (paratactic)

that they find (embedded)

and change the laws for the benefit of the schools. (paratactic)

(5) Simply because they have earned a lot of money form the restaurant
business (hypotactic)

and they can put their children in extra-curricular activities (paratactic)

which offer the necessary skills (hypotactic)

for this reason there are new tax regulations (paratactic)

that provide additional income for restaurant owners turn out
being very helpful. (embedded)

As example (4) indicates, the question “Therefore what is the reason for this?” is addressed by chaining one clause after another without a main clause. This clause-structuring strategy is characteristic of conversational discourse, where segments of discourse are joined in a sequence of thoughts that come to mind when speaking. Similarly, in example (5), the ideational content is structured mainly in the form of coordinate clauses rather than subordinate clauses.

Contrary to examples (4) and (5) above, registers of written academic discourse require that the ideational content of the text be structured in clause complexes made up of *main* and *embedded* clauses. A noteworthy finding was that the ESL students’ essays

showed a higher frequency of complexes made up of main, hypotactic, paratactic, and embedded clauses. Examples (6) and (7) are illustrative:

- (6) However, his responsibilities became greater and greater (main)
 because he wanted to prove his superiority over his
 co-workers (hypotactic)
 and continued to indulge in overtime work for the managers. (paratactic)
- (7) The document given by the Department of Health clearly show
 the big level of homelessness (main)
 that frequently take place in the large metropolitan area. (embedded)

Therefore, the movement along the spectrum *from oral to written language* with respect to clause-structuring strategies, was more easily identifiable in the writing samples produced by the ESL students.

A careful analysis of the writing samples indicated that Creole-English-speaking children do not represent a homogenous group. Those who were classified as *basilectal-mesolectal* and *mesolectal* distinctively used more hypotactic and paratactic clauses (30.4% and 41.2% respectively) than the *mesolectal-acrolectal* (16.4% usage of hypotactic clauses; 15.2% paratactic usage) and ESL students (21.2% usage of hypotactic clauses; 11.9% usage of paratactic clauses). Table 2 shows the students' use of different types of clause structure in percentages.

Table 2

Students' Use of Different Types of Clause Structure								
Shown in Percentages								
Clause type	Creole-English-Speaking Students						ESL Students	
	basilectal-mesolectal		mesolectal		mesolectal-acrolectal		No.	%
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Paratactic	1,216	41.2	1,002	31.7	581	15.2	498	11.9
Hypotactic	927	30.4	974	32.0	616	18.2	643	19.4
Main	607	16.3	589	14.1	1,142	35.1	1,075	34.5
Embedded	615	13.0	633	17.2	1,027	36.3	991	33.5

The observed differences between the basilectal-mesolectal/the mesolectal students and the mesolectal-acrolectal/ESL students with respect to the use of paratactic and hypotactic clause-structuring strategies, typical of more oral registers, may be associated with two factors. The first is hypothesized to be the linguistic structure of the Creole English and the second, the particularities of the creole continuum. English-based Creoles show lexical similarity with Standard English but diverge from the grammatical system of Standard English. The existence of this common lexicon often obscures the semantic boundaries between the Creole **English** and Standard **English**. This phenomenon causes a blurring of the distinctness or confusion about the lexical and grammatical features belonging to the Creole English linguistic system (which occurs predominantly in the registers of spoken discourse) and those lexical and grammatical features that are restricted to the registers of written academic Standard English. It will be recalled that in academic discourse a writer uses fewer clauses in each sentence, compressing large quantities of information into each clause and embedding subordinate clauses into main clauses (Eggins, 1994; Colombi, 2002).

The compression of large amounts of information into embedded clauses is carried out through the lexical and grammatical process of nominalization as well as nominal group structures. In the process of nominalization, verbs become nouns which are then modified by embedded relative clauses. For example, the congruent way to link the information in the first sentence is by means of two paratactic clauses similar to the way it is done in conversational registers: “*The teenagers attacked the bank employees with rifles and then removed the vaults*” If one were to represent the same information

by means of nominalization and nominal group structures typical of academic registers one would write this second sentence: “*The teenagers’ attack on the bank employees with rifles* (nominalization of **the verb** which would be **the noun “attack”** and creation of nominal group structure containing two prepositional phrases in post-modifier position to **the noun “attack”** which would be *on the bank employees with rifles*); *led to* (embedded clause modifying the entire previous nominal group structure) *the removal* of the vaults (nominalization of **the verb “remove”** and creation of nominal group structure containing one prepositional phrase). Thus, in the second sentence, typical of academic register, the two paratactic clauses in the first sentence (typical of conversational register) have been turned into one clause by a process that (a) nominalizes the verb in the clause thereby creating a nominal group structure typical of academic writing “*the teenagers’ attack on the bank employees*”) and (b) buries the paratactic conjunctive link (*and then*) between the two original clauses in the new embedded clause “*led to the removal of the vault.*” The nominalization of the verb “*remove*” to “*removal*” can be modified further by the addition of another relative clause such as “*which held millions of dollars.*” In other words, nominalization and nominal group structures eliminate the explicit paratactic conjunctions and suppress grammatical agency in order to condense information in highly structured ways. (For more details on the lexical and grammatical functions of nominalization and nominal group structures as register features of academic writing, readers are directed to Schleppegrell, 2004.) It is obvious from the above that one of the challenges in academic discourse lies in the student’s ability to create nominalization and nominal group structures consisting of pre- and post-modifiers as well as embedded clauses.

Nominalization and nominal group structures were noticeably absent from the writing samples of the Creole-English-speaking students classified as basilectal-mesolectal and mesolectal speakers. One explanation of the absence of this register feature may be found in Roberts's (1988) assertion that the structure of narrative in creole cultures shows elements which are characteristic of action with the *verb* bearing most of the force and the verb tense associated with the time of the action in the narrative. Hence, Creole-English speakers, such as the basilectal-mesolectal and the mesolectal, who are further away from the acrolectal variety (i.e., the Standard English variety) may be less cognizant of the underlying function of nominalization which is the essence of transforming verbs into nouns. In addition, the transformation of verbs into nouns is a grammatical process that may present a specific challenge for Creole-English-speaking children because the vocabulary overlap in Creole **English** and Standard **English** often disguises fundamental grammatical differences between the two languages (Clachar, 2004, 2005). Such challenges are not typical of ESL learners because their native languages such as Spanish, Haitian Creole, Farsi, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Tagalog, etc., do not have vocabulary overlap with Standard English.

The particularities of the creole continuum composed the second factor purported to contribute to the higher frequency of paratactic and hypotactic clauses in the Creole-English-speaking students' writing samples. Because the continuum is characterized by constant shifting among the basilect, mesolect, and acrolect, and thus, the lexical and grammatical variability of structures which emerges as speakers move among these lectal varieties, a Creole-English student's linguistic repertoire uses several basilect, mesolect and acrolect lexico-grammatical features typical of both conversational and academic

registers. Moreover, in the transitional zone between the mesolect and the acrolect of the continuum, there are lexico-grammatical features such as conjunctions and subordinators which belong to the acrolect (the Standard English variety) as well as the mesolect, where they are used to calque a number of creole functions, that is, functions typical of registers of conversational discourse due to the fact that English-based Creoles occur predominantly in spoken discourse. However, because Creole-English children are not entirely familiar with the lexical and grammatical register features of academic Standard English and they cannot easily match these features with the ones restricted to conversational discourse, they tend to transfer features such as paratactic and hypotactic clauses into their academic expository texts. It is interesting to note that the most English proficient creole-speaking students (classified in this study as mesolectal-acrolectal) exhibited a much lower use of the paratactic-hypotactic clause structures in their writing (15.2% usage of paratactic clauses and 16.4% usage of hypotactic clauses) compared with basilectal-mesolectal (41.2% paratactic usage; 30.4% hypotactic usage) and mesolectal (31.7% paratactic usage; 32.0% hypotactic usage). Table 2 provides this information.

The confluence of these writing challenges is that the linguistic repertoire of a Creole-English speaker ranges along a continuum and, as a result, there is a constant bidirectional shifting between two polar varieties (the creole and Standard English) which are typologically and genetically different from each other (Alleyne, 1980). Between these polar varieties exists a great deal of variability ranging from the basilectal speech (the conservative creole in the strict sense) to the mesolectal varieties (the intermediate, less creolized varieties) to the acrolect (the Standard English variety). That

is, any variable, whether it be morphological, syntactic, or lexico-semantic, can have as its variants features that can be identified with the basilectal features and features that can be identified with the intermediate mesolectal varieties of the continuum. The intermediate varieties can be conceptualized as approximations to Standard English or the reverse, approximations to the creole with respect to their formal linguistic properties (Rickford, 1987). This means that Creole-English children acquiring Standard English, and more specifically, the register features of written academic English are likely to exhibit considerable variation regarding the creole influence on their written English interlanguage. This phenomenon was clearly evident. The data showed the extent to which Creole-English students had moved toward the acrolectal end of the continuum: basilectal-mesolectal used a higher percentage of clause-structuring strategies typical of registers of speech (paratactic and hypotactic clause-chaining) whereas the more proficient mesolectal-acrolectal used a higher percentage of clause-structuring strategies typical of registers of academic discourse (35.1% usage of main clauses and 36.3% usage of embedded clauses). Table 2 gives the details on percentage of clause types used by the subjects.

Research Question 3 : How can the findings from the study inform teachers of the linguistic complexity of academic discourse? How does this complexity differ with respect to the challenges faced by Creole-English-speaking children versus challenges faced by ESL children?

The data indicated that within the basilectal and mesolectal range of the continuum, Creole-English children show a different profile of writing development from

ESL children, therefore, different pedagogical strategies are needed for Creole-English students at different stages of the curriculum. Students who are mainly basilectal and mesolectal speakers would greatly benefit from a writing program that helps them enhance their awareness of the differences between the Standard English input they receive and their own written production. Such a program should include literature by Caribbean writers who use both Creole English and the Standard, allowing students to perceive how features of both languages are similar and different and, ultimately, how similarities often disguise differences. Such specialized pedagogical strategies are not likely to become the focus in ESL literacy programs and thus, such programs cannot meet the needs of Creole-English children (Clachar, 2004).

It is obvious that the challenges related to register features of academic writing lie in an understanding of nominalization, nominal group structures, clause-structuring strategies, and paratactic conjunctions in clause combining. In order to write academic texts, students need to develop an awareness of the register features of the language of schooling, moving from writing procedural recounts to creating explanations that draw on lexical and grammatical choices based on explicit recognition of the function of academic registers. Children who speak English-based Creoles have difficulties building a separate mental representation for Standard English because of the blurred boundaries between Standard and Creole English and their habit of constantly shifting back and forth between these varieties. There are two consequences associated with this phenomenon. First, Creole-English speakers (like speakers of other nonstandard varieties of English such as African-American Vernacular English) may believe that they already know Standard English and thus, may not be motivated to confine themselves to

Standard English patterns in their writing. Second, they may not recognize new English structures and new register features of academic English taught to them and, therefore, fail to use these register features. (See Craig, 1998). Such literacy concerns are not typical of ESL students.

Conclusion

The goal of the study was to point out that the concept English as a second language (ESL) learner can be misleading particularly when Creole-English-speaking children, who are neither native nor nonnative (i.e., ESL) learners of English, become the focus of second-language-acquisition research. The study also submits that even when Creole-English speakers' writing behaviors are examined, their challenges suggest they do not represent a homogenous group of learners and therefore, their literacy needs cannot be addressed by an ESL curriculum in the public schools, but rather by one that attends to their specific writing difficulties. The findings related to Creole-English and ESL children's use of clause structure in the acquisition of academic writing provide a useful starting point for examining what develops in the development of writing and for understanding the complexities of language challenges faced by different ethnolinguistic populations whose linguistic profile do not place them in the traditional language-acquisition paradigm typical of the United States educational system. The research on clause structure provided an understanding of the difficulties involved in acquiring facility with academic register features and why lower- and working-class children who speak nonstandard dialects of English must be explicitly taught the lexical and

grammatical resources that are *functional* for analyzing the academic texts they read and for transferring these resources to the academic texts they write.

Notes

1. The justification for classifying Creole English varieties as dialects of English is based on historical factors. The post-emancipation period in the Anglophone Caribbean was marked by the attenuation of social, political, and economic barriers between whites and non-whites (e.g., field slaves, house slaves, and a “middle group” of artisans, headmen, drivers, etc.) which gave rise to different degrees of linguistic acculturation in the direction of the standard English variety (Alleyne, 1980, p. 184). Consequently, a spectrum of varieties - from the most conservative creole (lexically related to the Standard English variety) to intermediate varieties - has emerged. The intermediate varieties exhibit clear instances of lexical and grammatical overlap with the local Standard, even though Winford (1994) cautions that these varieties also show significant dissimilarities with the Standard.
2. ESD is the abbreviation for English as a second dialect which is distinguished from ESL, the abbreviation for English as a second language. Speakers of nonstandard dialects of English such as Creole English and the African-American Vernacular English are individuals for whom Standard English is a second dialect.
3. I use the term “children from an oral tradition” to mean children whose first or home language occurs predominantly in conversational discourse, has no standardized orthography, and therefore, is not generally used in school-based textbooks.
4. The morphosyntactic strategy of *serialization* in which a series of two or more verbs are strung together without a conjunction or complementizer, is frequently found in Caribbean Creoles. Holm (1988) posits that the “combined meaning of serial verbs can be seen as falling into several categories” (p. 183). One such semantic category conveys a sense of direction in which the verb “come” expresses the idea of “movement toward” and the verb “go” suggests the opposite:

“movement away from” (p.183). The following examples from Guyanese Creole and Jamaican Creole (Alleyne, 1980, p.12) are illustrative:

Dem kya i kom gi wi.

They carry it come give we. [= They brought it to us.]

Dem ron go lef im.

They run go leave him. [= They ran away from him.]

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