Hegemonic Influences in Language Use in the Primary Classroom in Tobago

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Abstract
Language choice in schools in the Caribbean islands that were colonized by the British has always been a controversial issue, as teachers and students use Creole English as their first language for communication. The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine whether hegemonic influences prevail in language use in Tobago classrooms and to acquire deeper insights into the nature of those influences. The sample consisted of seven participants, who are teachers at a primary school in Tobago. The data collection instruments included in-depth interviews, observations and a semi-structured questionnaire and data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach. The results showed that hegemonic influences exist in the classroom with regard to pedagogical methods, classroom management and teacher beliefs. It is recommended that a needs analysis be conducted to lend support to teachers and for the implementation of a more culturally relevant model of language use in Tobago.

Keywords: Tobago, language use, teachers, Creole English, hegemonic forces, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Creole English (CE) has been used as the first language in homes in Tobago. Consequently, it has been utilized by teachers to increase understanding for students. But historically, English language has been recognized as the preferred mechanism for teaching and learning (Campbell, 1996; Williams, 1942). This research involves whether hegemonic influences are prevalent and their particularities in language use in the primary classroom. The study was conducted with teachers at a primary school in Tobago, one of the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether hegemonic influences have persisted. It also sought to bring to light the ways in which hegemonic antecedents prevail in Tobago classrooms in teaching and learning process as far as language use is concerned.

3. Significance of the Study

The study is significant as policy makers, teachers, parents and students and educators in general can benefit from the research. The information can generate further debate on the topic which will add to the discourse on language use pertaining to Creole English and Standard English as a second language in the post-colonial context.

4. Theoretical Framework

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to unearth and ascertain the predominance of hegemonic influences in the teaching/ learning process at the primary level. The theoretical underpinnings were informed by black box, post-colonial and social learning theory.

5. Literature Review

Various authors agree that the question of language choice has been a persistent topic of international scholarly debate (Allsopp & Jennings, 2014; aus der Wieschen & Sert, 2021; Chege, 2009; Erarslan & Topkaya, 2019; Nabea, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2009; Wilden & Porsch, 2020). This issue extends beyond literacy to encompass significant cultural and political dimensions (Baldwin & Quinn, 2007). Although the benefits of acquiring proficiency in Standard English (SE) are widely recognized, the status and preservation of local, Indigenous, minority, and heritage languages remain contentious.

The ongoing discourse around language use intersects with broader questions of educational reform and postcolonial dynamics (Bristol, 2012; Robertson & Simmons-McDonald, 2014). In Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), these debates are often linked to concerns about students' academic underperformance and disruptive behaviors. According to the *English Language Arts Curriculum Guide*, primary school students exhibit a "psychological resistance" (p. 21) to the study and use of Standard English, highlighting the complexities surrounding language education in the postcolonial context.

5.1.   Pedagogical Methods:

Research indicates that educators in postcolonial contexts frequently employ pedagogical strategies such as code-switching and the use of students' first languages. These approaches serve multiple functions that are essential for effective classroom communication and learning. Researchers such as Chen and Rubinstein-Avila (2018), Khairunnisa and Izzah (2022), Ma (2020), and Saxena (2009) have identified the use of code-switching as instrumental not only in the construction and transmission of knowledge but also in classroom management and fostering interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, other studies have emphasized that children achieve optimal learning outcomes when the language of instruction aligns with the language of their socialization. This perspective underscores the first language as the most effective medium for learning and classroom communication, as supported by the findings of Behrmann (2018), Cooper (2019), Craig (2014), Lodge (2017), and Simmons-McDonald (2014).

In a study conducted with primary teachers across Trinidad and Tobago, Robertson (2010) found the following:

> Classroom teachers surveyed also indicated that they rely on the first language of their students when communication through the English medium proves ineffective. This reality indicates that, despite the unwritten policy of English as the language of education, classroom teachers find the use of the language brought to school by the students, Trinidadian and /or Tobagonian English-lexicon Creole, a more productive linguistic medium for instruction and an easier medium for the transition from home to school. (p. 20)

5.2.   Classroom Management

Classroom management is essential in shaping the dynamics of the learning environment, directly impacting the behaviours, interactions, and responses of both teachers and students. Central to effective classroom management are elements such as rules, procedures, and strategies for behaviour management, which collectively create a foundation for successful teaching and learning. In this context, many teachers incorporate Creole English as a valuable pedagogical tool to support a positive and productive learning atmosphere (Behrmann, 2018; Lodge, 2017; Robertson, 2010). Craig (2014) argued that Creole and mesolectal languages should not be seen as impediments to education but rather as instrumental resources that facilitate the teaching and learning of Standard English.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, educators hold varying perspectives on the use of Creole English as a medium of classroom communication. Influenced by the historical legacy of colonial monolingual ideologies and linguistic hegemony, some teachers equate the use of Creole with academic underperformance and enforce a strict Standard English-only policy. This approach stems from the belief of some teachers that Standard English possesses an intrinsic value or redemptive power. For such educators, Creole is regarded as "bad" English, and students are expected to consistently use "good" English within the classroom and school environment.

5.3.   Teacher Beliefs

To mitigate this issue, Craig (2014) highlighted the importance of teacher language beliefs and linguistic competence as essential components of effective pedagogy. He argued that teachers must possess explicit knowledge of both the first language (L1) and second language (L2), as well as the ability to conduct contrastive analyses and similar linguistic activities. Roberts (2014) similarly emphasized the need to deepen understanding of Creoles, asserting that this shift could help students master language while challenging entrenched attitudes of "social and academic snobbery" (p. 87). From an evolutionary perspective, Roberts (2014) further contended that in the Caribbean context, the use of Creole in the teaching-learning process should be viewed as a complementary pathway to mastering Standard English, rather than as a competing force (p. 88).

6.   Main Research Question

What hegemonic influences are prevalent in language use in the teaching/learning process in the primary classroom in Tobago?

6.1.   Sub-Questions:

- How do teachers' pedagogical methods and language use for teaching and learning demonstrate hegemonic practices?
- How do language use and classroom management techniques, during the teaching and learning process, reflect hegemonic forces?
- What are teacher beliefs about hegemonic machinations in the classroom?

7.   Sample/ Participants

Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants for this study. The sample consisted of seven (7) teachers from one primary school in Tobago. There were two males and five females whose ages ranged between twenty-six to fifty-five years. All participants are Tobagonians who were educated at both the primary and secondary level in the local setting but two persons received tertiary education at foreign institutions. Three teachers had an average of five years teaching experience at the particular school and the other four between 11 to 20 years. All participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study and no coercion was used. Written permission was obtained from the Division of Education in Tobago, the school's principal and the participants themselves. Participants consented to in-depth interviews as well as follow-up conversations via WhatsApp for clarification of any issues. They completed a semi-structured questionnaire and voluntarily allowed the researchers in their classrooms to observe their lessons. Strict anonymity, with the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality, using alphabetical codes, were adhered to throughout the study.

8.   Data Collection Instruments

To attain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and experiences of the participants, multiple methods were used to gather data. These included a semi-structured questionnaire, observations of lessons in the classrooms and in-depth interviews. These techniques allowed for corroboration of data, which

served to establish credibility, accuracy and truthfulness. The different sources of data facilitated triangulation, trustworthiness and rigour. "The key criteria for ensuring the quality of qualitative research include credibility, achieved through extended involvement, persistent observation, and triangulation . . ." (Ahmed 2024, p. 1) They allow for the unearthing of meaningful insights in the findings and served to strengthen the authenticity and validity of the study.

9. Data Analysis

A five-step approach was adopted for the data analysis in this research as follows:

Step 1 – Reiterative readings of transcripts from the in-depth interviews, observations and semi-structured questionnaire

Step 2 - Data reduction through line-by-line coding and revision of codes

Step 3 - Formulation of categories from codes

Step 4 - Discerning sub-themes

Step 5 - Emergent themes

The data from the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure credibility of the research. The information from the semi-structured questionnaire, observations and in-depth interviews were read iteratively and commonalities were highlighted. According to Saldana (2021), common ideas are easily recognizable from repeated readings. A matrix (Fig 1), as advocated by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), with a five-step approach was developed and followed. The data were collated, reduced and similar ideas were pooled together. Codes, as suggested by (Creswell & Poth, 2013) were formulated by identifying meaningful, recurrent phrases, words and sentences. Categories were then identified by eliminating outliers as well as revising and merging codes in summary form. Through rigorous analysis, comparing, contrasting and corroboration of data, together with continuous reflexivity, sub-themes emanated, which subsequently culminated into the emergence of final themes.

10. Limitations of the study

The research is established in the qualitative paradigm to unmask the hegemonic forces that may be prevalent in language use in the classroom. Purposive sampling was conducted to select a particular group of teachers who belong to one primary school in Tobago. As such, the results may not be generalizable.

11. Findings and Discussion

Evidence from the data suggested the presence of hegemonic forces in the primary school classroom in Tobago. The data from observations of lessons, in-depth interviews and a questionnaire revealed how power was used based on teacher beliefs, teacher-centred pedagogical methods and classroom management styles. Teachers are endowed with assigned or legitimate and coercive power (McCroskey & Richmond, 2005) by virtue of their position in the education system. The power in the context of this study implied dominance by either coercion or consent.

Ultimately, pedagogical practices and classroom management styles implemented in the teaching/ learning process are integrally embedded in teacher beliefs and personal philosophies. Classroom

management was a significant consideration because it constituted elements that shaped the learning environment which in turn influenced the actions, interactions and reactions of participants and students. Classroom rules, procedures and guidelines for managing student behaviours generally form part of classroom management and set the platform for teaching and learning to take place.

11.1.   *Themes that Emerged:*
Theme 1:– 'Back to Basics' - the Power of Pedagogical Tradition

Observation of lessons across various standards and subject areas revealed that the participants heavily utilized a traditional teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing the power of pedagogical tradition, which are deeply ingrained in hegemonic influences. Although having its merits, the strategies rendered the students as passive learners. The questions teachers asked in the teaching process usually required yes/no responses and in cases where students participated, the responses were content specific and not in complete sentences. Generally, students' contributions were minimal and limited to short responses such as "yes or no miss/sir. Corrections that teachers conducted were mostly content related while students remained in silence and passivity in the classroom were notable. Below is an excerpt from the observation of a lesson in a classroom:

> *The class is an Infant II with 4 boys and 14 girls. The lesson is a reading comprehension about butterflies and bees. The teacher engages students in a short conversation about insects using some pictures of various insects and students respond in short one-word answers . . . The teacher distributes a sheet to each student and then reads the passage (7 lines) very slowly as each student follows along.*
>
> *The teacher explains the word "transparent" using Standard English interspersed with Creole, then continues to read. She tells the students to read with her. She then proceeds to ask questions. The questions require one-word answers and short phrases which the students are expected to retrieve from the passage. Some students respond in short phrases which the teacher wrote on the board.*
>
> *Then the teacher explained the similarities and differences between the butterflies and the bees. The discussion is teacher controlled and dominated. There was no opportunity for students to freely express themselves in Creole/ Standard English or have free conversations.*

Conversations and discussions were generally teacher controlled and directed so the role of the students was to comply, which Freire (2005) referred to as oppressive. The traditional teacher-centred pedagogical approaches demonstrate that post-colonial hegemonic forces continue to prevail. The notion is also aligned with a conceptually established practice of teachers-teach-the-way-they-were-taught.

From the observations, the lessons were teacher-centred and students were quiet throughout the lessons within a culture of silence (Freire, 2005). This is in tandem with Freire's (2005) concept of 'banking education' whereby teachers espouse content without regard for students' experiences, as they are required to listen as passive recipients or depositories. The results also demonstrated that the classroom situation required teacher skills in second language teaching. McCroskey and

Richmond (2005) agree that teachers need training in classroom communication. Freire (2005) advocated a more meaningful way for students to experience education and schooling through problem-posing praxis that allows for analysis and creativity

11.2.   *Theme 2: Teachers as a Disciplinarians*

During the observation of lessons, classroom management strategies were conducted in an authoritarian manner using either Creole Language or Standard English. The teacher as a disciplinarian was firm and strict with an intimidating voice. Sometimes participants would mix the two languages by beginning with Standard English and continuing in Creole English. For example, in a Reading Comprehension lesson, a participant told a student in a menacing tone, "K…, ent jump up at all! Don't stand up either!" This was generally the case when participants dealt with issues of student misbehaviours, indifference and inattentiveness. Creole English was the preferred language for these vociferations.

The data revealed teachers' tendency towards Creole English when participants became frustrated. This was observed on three occasions when students asked to be excused to drink water because it was humid. Teachers used Creole English to address students who made the requests. For example, one participant denied a request by saying: "Yuh cyar ask me dat now!"

The in-depth interviews, questionnaire and classroom observations revealed that participants' classroom management strategies were usually dictatorial and they used Creole language with a strong intonation. Some coercive teacher utterances, while appearing irritated or upset are outlined below, for example:

   "Yuh didn't have to do that eh nuh!" (You did not have to do that.)

   "I ent ask enyting yet! Put yuh hand down!" (I have not asked anything yet. Put down your hand.)

   "If yuh mek noise, me an you go fall out." (If you make noise, we will have confrontation).

In the in-depth interviews, the participants shared that their preferred classroom management style was either authoritative or warm/permissive, but the observations of lessons demonstrated authoritarianism. One participant claimed that her classroom management style is hybrid and explained how she operated in that mode. However, while she adopted a seemingly gentle approach initially, her words became firmer when students did not cooperate, and she would eventually code-switch to Creole English. For instance, the participant said:

> I think it's more hybrid because each style has its place and has its time because what would work for one child would not work for the other and what would work for one situation would not work for the other and therefore my belief is that a hybrid would work best.

Another participant declared:

> The person might be talking too much and you don't want to shout so you say XY you need to listen or whatever. But you might just hand that out and say "hand that to such and such person, and they would recognize what is written there "pay attention please".
>
> You know . . . at other times . . . at other times if that doesn't work, you need to say "hey shut up!" At other times . . . "hush yuh mout!"

On another occasion, there was a commotion in the class next door and the participant went over to investigate. The teacher of the class had stepped away for a while and the participant spoke quite sternly to the students in Standard English about being quiet. After two minutes when the noises started again, she returned to the class and spoke in Creole English, even more sternly than before and proceeded to scold two students who were uncooperative.

During observation of a lesson in an Infant II class, a male student was not engaged in the assigned work and was misbehaving with his seat-mate. The teacher reprimanded him severely with harsh, disrespectful verbiage. The anecdotes outlined portray residual hegemonic practices from colonial times. According to social learning theorist Albert Bandura (1971), learning takes place by observing, modelling and imitating and teachers may have been exposed to that kind of experience. But, it is incumbent upon teachers to refer to a repertoire of experiences, maintain awareness of classroom management theories such assertive discipline, remain flexible, adopt a reflective approach, respond humanely and adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of the classroom. The examples of how some participants approached classroom management pointed to certain beliefs held by teachers, which bore great semblance to how classrooms were managed in the colonial era, which are reflective of deep-seated hegemonic influences.

11.3. Theme 3: Teachers' Ideologies

The majority of participants believed that Standard English (SE) is superior to Creole English but most preferred to use both as revealed in the data. In the in-depth interviews, the constant reference to "proper" and "correct" indicated this. For example, a participant responded to the question on whether she ever found herself struggling to use Standard English and, in her response used the words "correctly" and "right". Her concern was accuracy in SE such as using the appropriate tense and structures. She stated:

> *Where am I? Did I say this correctly? . . . I know that . . . arm . . . well many of us would struggle just to make sure that you keep it right and for me when you focus too much on keeping it right or getting it right you always find yuhself stumbling.*

Concerning language use in the classroom, another respondent, who believed that SE is the preferred language, articulated the phrase "a better way". She explained,

> *So let's say the child is reading or maybe speak and say "ah goin dong de road" and you'd say "Not, ah goin dong de road". Then I would ask: "Could you say that a better way (SE)"? Then you would model what it should be.*

A participant used the term "proper English" (meaning SE) several times in talking about her language experience at the school. She noted,

> *The teachers, they speak 'proper' English (SE) but they could switch easily . . . and I . . . I although in the questionnaire too, there were some questions I was not even sure how to answer. I don't consider myself speaking proper English [Standard English] per se but maybe polished . . . if I were to say polished. So, is like . . . where does that stand between Creole and proper English (SE)?*

With respect to a question as to whether she had concerns about how her students use language, another participant responded:

> *. . . so they try, I guess more so probably when we're doing Language Arts and they have to respond in a proper way (SE) because you get marks for those . . . even in the grammar you know, the structure of all the sentences and the verbs and subjects and all these things, I find that you do see the way they talk coming out sometimes. It's not natural because we practice saying the wrong thing (Creole English) all the time.*

From the excerpts above, the use of the term, such as 'proper', 'correct' and 'wrong thing' suggest that there exists in the minds of participants a hierarchy of languages, with Standard English as the preferred mode. Historically, SE has been given legitimacy while CE was viewed with disdain (London, 1995). In addition, the use of SE is associated with higher social status and this ideology continues to prevail in the classroom as well as the larger society. The implication is that hegemonic practices still prevalent in the classroom.

One participant was more expressive regarding this matter, and her beliefs were clearly communicated as she identified Creole English as "broken up" and she lobbied for the maintenance of Standard English in her interview. She explained:

> *We are taught to use the Standard English, but in the communities, it is not followed up properly because they [students] are allowed to hear the dialect and the other way the um, adults speak . . . they don't maintain the Standard English . . . It always broken up, whereas for me . . . I don't know where we fall short. We must maintain the Standard English in a conversation when we are exposed to the other jargons of the English that we use in T&T.*

Another respondent further expressed intolerance towards Creole English and even aggressiveness when describing how her students usually asked her for clarification or to repeat something.

> *. . . a child will ask "Miss wah?" "Miss wah yuh say?" Is like where you get that from? You don't talk like that in English. You don't . . . you ever see I write "Miss wah yuh say?" on the board? Or "Miss wah?" . . . I'm not fighting with . . . I'm not in a war, so don't 'wah' me. You ask them something, "Miss! Miss!" I say "I'm right here are you missing me?" No, . . . they just don't connect that you have to maintain a certain level of speaking. I know I said principles of English but . . . you maintain the certain rules of English, that you portray in a conversation.*

The anecdotes above demonstrate how Creole English, is denigrated and portrayed as inferior to Standard English. Students imbibe the ideology, and consequently are taught, either directly or subliminally, to view Creole English disparagingly. This resonates with the thrust of the colonizers to 'anglicise' the locals (London 2003), with the notion that SE is the sin qua non.

Another participant then proceeded to speak in terms of saving students. This alluded to the belief communicated by colonisers, according to London (2002), that there was some salvific value in Standard English. The participant stated the following:

> *. . . if we could save 5 out of 10 or out of fifteen and let them go out in society speaking properly and note that the Standard English has a place in their vocabulary and in their communicating with others, we wouldn't get the set of stupid language we hearing and the - the curse words wouldn't come into the classroom because there is no place for that there, there's no place for it.*

Four of the respondents were also clear on the position that subject content should not be taught using Creole English, because it was not the Standard language. These positions demonstrated that some teachers believed that there was a hierarchy of languages in the classroom with Standard English at the epitome. This ideological position carried with it certain aspects which caused individuals who do not consistently speak Standard English to be seen in a very poor light. Nero (2018) noted:

> Two key features of Creole contexts are (1) The European language is privileged in all formal domains, and the Creole is generally stigmatized; and (2) sharp social stratification and a strong association between language and social class where proficiency in the European language is linked to high social class and academic achievement. Conversely, Creole-dominant speech is associated with low social status and academic underachievement. (p. 206)

A significant issue, which emanated from this research, is the problem of conflicting linguistic identities. While participants outwardly demonstrate acceptance of Standard English and rejection of Creole English, they use the Creole English in significant ways in the classroom and chosen areas of their personal lives. According to Bhabha (1994) ambivalence is a major characteristic of postcolonial societies and is a factor in educational settings.

It is evident that most of the respondents placed a high value on Standard English and saw Creole English as inferior. Others felt that CE should have no place in the classroom as it is low-ranking and unworthy. Their beliefs and actions are characteristic of the *comprador elites*, individuals who were left behind by the colonizers to carry on their civilizing mission. This was alluded to by Said (1993, as cited in Gandhi, 1998) who lamented about the "cultural adhesions of colonialism" (p. 132) and opined that colonial language and discourse "manifested itself as an influential system of ideas, or an inter-textual network of interests and meanings implicated in the social, political, and institutional contexts of colonial hegemony" (p. 143).

12. Conclusion

The research shows that hegemonic influences continue to persist with regard to language use in the primary classroom in Tobago. These manifest themselves in teachers' pedagogical practices, classroom management strategies and in their beliefs. The implication is that curricular adjustments and reform are necessary, but these may not possible without delving in the classroom (Apple & Weiss, 1983). It is in the classroom black box that teachers engage in linguistic practices and ideological hegemony.

13. Recommendations

It is recommended that a needs analysis should be conducted to lend support to teachers and for the implementation of a more culturally relevant model of language use in Tobago. Additional research and a national discourse on the issue will be useful for further deliberations.

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