

# Writing in Home Dialects: Choosing a Written Discourse in a Teacher Education Class

*Speakers of vernacular English often carry with them a burden that is the product of speaking what they have been told is an inferior dialect. Eileen Kennedy, who teaches speakers of Caribbean creole, wondered if it would be possible to use the authentic language of these students to help them both develop stronger voices as writers and become more competent writers of Standard English. This is the story of her experiment.*

EILEEN KENNEDY

*Da other day when a went by Sears a had so much problem with the bay who was helping me. first a try to get bay to help me and he juss keep runnin around de place like he stupid. Den when he finally came and a ack him to show me some o de frig and them de wuz acking like he en even no wah goin on.*



page 4). Though many of these Caribbean students were reluctant writers, they were almost all articulate speakers, sometimes in dialect, sometimes in Standard English, sometimes in both. However, they seemed unable to transform this verbal communication to written form. This article is a description of the experimental writing of these Caribbean students.

Students from the Caribbean have traditionally had their languages devalued and often don't even have a system of symbols to write their language. Elsasser and Irvine (1985), who did a landmark

study on vernacular Englishes in the College of Virgin Islands, assert that "the rigid domain demarcation between creole and English and between Caribbean and American cultures in the Virgin Islands produces alienation and silence in writing courses" (1985, 405). How then would it be possible to create an equal opportunity classroom community when students are not allowed to communicate in their language?

Using the theoretical rationale of Vygotsky and Kutz and the frameworks of Irvine and Elbow, I devised ways to explore with these students the possibility of finding their most powerful voice in writing by inviting them to write in their authentic language.

## The Contradictory Relationship of Creole to English

This would be a new experience for these students. A vast majority of Caribbeans—90 percent of the population by some accounts (Craig 1982, 198)—uses some form of creole or vernacular English in

This is an excerpt from an essay, written in Grenadian creole dialect, that explores the communication dynamics the author experienced when buying a refrigerator. The account provides an example of the prejudicial behavior that speakers of vernacular may encounter when they use that vernacular in conversation with a speaker of Standard English. The author of this piece, a teacher candidate in my survey course in special education at a City University of New York (CUNY) college, was one of fifteen Caribbean students (out of a class of thirty-one students), who spoke some form of creole, vernacular English, or a language other than English (see figure 1,

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informal communication. However, “the official language, Standard English, is the preferred medium of public communication, the vehicle of literacy, and the medium of education at all levels of the education system” (198). This disparity between the spoken language and official language has caused problems for students who must write in Standard English.

This contradictory relationship of Standard English to creole is prevalent in the societies from which my students originated. So any effort to assess creole and patois speakers in standard form becomes problematic: “To use the Western European model of formal, planned registers (which are characterized by structural features such as the use of complex sentence structure and discourse mechanisms) as a model to determine the ‘sophistication’ of creole languages is faulty” (Alleyne 1994, 16).

And yet my teacher candidates are required to take a standardized teacher assessment test, which has a written section that they must pass in standard form in New York State.

### Writing in an Academic Community

Vygotsky (1962) asserts that words, as a part of individual culture, cannot be meaningfully considered in isolation. He insists that the transition from inner speech to written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics, or deliberate restructuring of meaning. My students, I felt, needed to connect their own voice and language to this meaning.

Further, I wanted a way of making the school-based essay more relevant to the classroom community, rather than just an exercise in isolation for the teacher’s approval. Kutz states that “writing for academic purposes at more advanced

levels can be an . . . authentic act of communication where the audience is not just the teacher but a peer group of interested learners and the purpose of the writing is to present . . . content and create new shared knowledge in a way that will involve listeners/readers, not just a product prepared for the teacher’s evaluation of the students’ learning” (1997, 250).

But if my class was to be a community of writers, listeners, and readers producing written speech, there was an additional problem to overcome. Elsasser and Irvine state that “because of the lack of informal registers of English and the stigma attached to creole in educational institutions, many students produce writing that is ‘correct’ but distant and flat” (1985, 405). Part of my challenge was to help students understand that writing did not have to be dull.

### Integrating Vernaculars into Written Discourse

In trying to help my teacher candidates negotiate written text in standard form, I drew on the framework of Elsasser and Irvine from their work at College of the Virgin Islands, who suggested the following:

*At the college level, resistance to writing and to learning standard English can be mitigated by actively exploiting the tensions between creole and English in the following ways: (1) providing a framework to distinguish creole and English as separate, rule-governed linguistic systems; (2) addressing the power relations inherent in language choice and language attitudes; and (3) integrating the study of creole, and writing in creole, with learning*

*academic research and writing skills.* (1985, 406)

I also drew on Elbow’s work in oral language experiences as a bridge to strengthening students’ writing. He cautions against traditional ways of viewing writing and urges that we look at the similar and complementary properties of speech and writing and the shifting relationships between them. “I seek to celebrate the flexibility of writing as a medium” (1986, 300).

These are the models I used as I attempted to integrate my students’ natural vernaculars into their writing for the course. Out of the fifteen Caribbean students who were invited to participate in the writing experiment, ten students accepted (see figure 1). The students came from different parts of the Caribbean. Of the ten students who participated, six spoke vernacular Englishes, three spoke Spanish, and one spoke Haitian creole.

To provide a framework to distinguish creole from Standard English, to draw on the similarities and complements of spoken and written language, and to integrate creole into the classroom, I invited my Caribbean students to write an essay in their vernacular dialects or languages. To my surprise, no one took me up on this invitation. Even though these students had volunteered to participate, they were reluctant to plunge into this task, and I didn’t know why. Over the next few weeks, I tried to get to the bottom of their reluctance.

### The Reluctance of Students Who Speak Vernaculars to Write

I came to understand that the students were not only reluctant to write in their vernacular, they were, in fact, reluctant to

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write at all. I participated with them in a freewrite about their attitudes toward writing in general. Here are two student excerpts:

(sample 1)

*I definat hate writing. Takes too much time when you can talk about what you want. Writing is a bore and a process we can live without. Writing is a very difficult process that involves a lot of thinking especially if you don't have a command of the English grammar . . . In my country, we spoke 'Patois,' as a result, is sometimes confuses my tenses and my punctuation. Everytime I tried to write exceptionally well, thinking that my grammar is intact, the end result is always watch your grammar. I really feel down at times when I have to write.*

(sample 2)

*Writing gives me a chance to express myself, but sometimes ah get very disappointed about my grade because of grammar . . . I am from Grenada in the West Indies where we speak broken english. In school is something different we speak and write under the British rule, even some of the words are spell differently from the American words . . . As I get into the American system its something totally different because when you talk people would stare at you, like you are stupid or you speak inhumane.*

Frustrated with these responses, I talked to other teachers in the field about my reluctant writers. I revisited the writings of Elbow and Irvine. I knew there must be a way to reach my students, to get them to

Student Number	Country of Origin	Wrote in Vernacular
1	Dominican Republic	Yes
2	Jamaica	No
3	Panama	Yes
4	Guyana	No
5	St. Lucia/Jamaica	No
6	Dominican Republic	Yes
7	Jamaica	Yes
8	Haiti	Yes
9	Grenada	No
10	St. Vincent	Yes
11	Trinidad	Yes
12	Grenada	Yes
13	Trinidad	Yes
14	Jamaica	No
15	Jamaica	Yes

Figure 1

experiment with writing in their own language and empower their written voices. I reasoned that one way to make them more comfortable with this process would be to help them understand that they were not alone in their use of vernacular. I began to talk to my class about my own experiences with dialects. I told them about my father's Irish brogue and his experiences as an immigrant coming to America. As I opened up, relaying aspects of my personal life, I happened to mention my son and my experiences as a single mother in a nuclear family-oriented society. This may be the reason my students gave me a Mother's Day card. I was encouraged when some writing on this card was in the students' vernaculars. I realized that as the students became more interested in me, they became more open about expressing themselves in their vernaculars.

I interviewed each of my Caribbean students one by one. They shared with me that they had never written in their vernacular because they were not allowed to in their school systems. One student said she had been told by her teachers

that the dialect she spoke was "broken English" and not worthy of being written. Another told me it was hard for her to write in patois because she had never been taught how to do it.

Elsasser and Irvine found in their work with Caribbean students:

*. . . their reluctance to write (was) directly attributable to the denigration of their native language and to their conviction that they do not, in fact, possess a true language but speak a bastardized version of English. It is difficult if not impossible to write without a language, and it is emotionally draining to attempt to develop voice and fluency in an education system that has historically denigrated one's own language. (1985, 406)*

My students who spoke vernacular Englishes seemed to suffer from the stigmatization that Elsasser and Irvine described. Their dialect had been devalued and banned from the classroom.

### Addressing the Power Relations in Language and Choice

To address the power relations in the choice of language, I began talking to my students about how I felt their creole was not "broken," but a vibrant legitimate language that should be honored in the classroom discourse.

I broke the class into smaller groups and then invited them to discuss among themselves, and in their vernaculars, the week's topic, communication. Many talked about their backgrounds and discovered some similarities in dialects and origins. Some expressed hesitancy about writing in a system they had no symbolic basis for and one which was



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banned from use in school. Some claimed that they never wanted to write in vernaculars, but preferred to try to perform in Standard English only.

I then invited these students, who had previously turned down the opportunity, to again write in their vernaculars. Since the topic in our curriculum that week was communication problems, I assigned them to write about a communication problem, one conducive to the use of spoken language, such as an encounter with a public servant or a sales person. I wanted them to think particularly about situations where they were unfamiliar with the terminology. I told them to write phonetically, that is, to give a symbolic relation to their language. By way of example, I mentioned a situation in which the writer was attempting to purchase a refrigerator, and many of the students took me up on this suggestion.

### Integrating Creoles with Written English Form

This time, ten of the students wrote drafts in their vernaculars and a final draft in Standard English. Although I was admittedly working with a small sample, these students seemed better able to express themselves more proficiently in Standard English after creating a draft in their vernacular. Here are excerpts from these students' vernacular drafts, and their final drafts in Standard English.

Student 15 wrote in her draft: "Communication is the ability to interact wid each ither."

The same student wrote in her final draft: "Communication is an interpersonal skill that is necessary for people to make their most basic needs and desires known."

Student 11 first wrote: "I went and tell de fella dat ah lookin' for a medium size

fridge, preferably off white, and ah want an ice-maker and a built in filter."

And in her final draft: "I went with the intention of getting an off-white refridgerator with an ice-maker and built in filter."

Student 7's vernacular version included: "It tek a while fi me to sey when mi wan fi sey. Anyway when me see di saleman and try fi tell him wah mi want him couldn't understand one word mi sey."

That student's Standard English version read: "... it was very difficult for me to explain what I wanted ... and it took me awhile to formulate my words."

Several of the students who did the assignment considered their vernaculars in themselves a communication problem when they were in a Standard English situation.

Student 10 wrote in her draft:

*The man gave me an enormous price which I knew was not so. I looked at him and said "Wha happen, day ah fite war someway so yo ah ge me war price?" He looked at me but said nothing, so I continued, "Me come ya fu buy ah simple machine fu wash me dutt' clothes an yo war fu sell me ah whole laundry mat" He said to me, "Woman, I do not understand what you are saying. When you learn to talk you can come back."*

Here is Student 10's final draft:

*He gave me an enormous price while his eyes were asking me to get out of his store. I knew the reason why he told me that price was because of the way I spoke, so I asked him if there was a war going on somewhere because the price he was asking for the washer was a price you'd ask*

*during war time. He looked at me and said nothing, so I continued to speak. I told him I only came there to buy a simple washing machine to wash my dirty clothes but he wanted to charge the price for an entire laundry mat. He got angry and told him to leave the store and only come back when I learnt how to speak properly.*

Student 13 wrote in his draft:

*A went tuh sears de odda day, tuh buy a frige, but dat was de mos annoying ting ever ... Firse de man go ask me, wuh kinda frige a looking for ... Wuh kinda schpid question is dat? So a tell him, look, a doh fuss wit brans and ting ya know, a just want a regular frige. Den de man go make a big deal an tell meh tuh talk slow an tuh prounonce meh words properly. ...*

His final draft read:

*I went to sears the other day, to buy a frige, but that was the most annoying thing ever. First, the man asked me, what kind of frige I'm looking for ... What kind of stupid question is that? So I told him, look, I don't care about brand names and stuff you know, I just want a regular frige. Then he made me a big deal, and told me to talk slow and to pronounce my words properly.*

Student 12 wrote in her draft: "Everytime a ask him something about de frig he juss keep stups in and swell up he face bu me en care wah he do with the face da is he business."

The same student wrote in her final: "Everytime I asked him something about the refrigerator he kept on sucking his

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teeth and swelling up his face. However I didn't even care what he did with his face, that was his business."

### Student Reactions

The most significant aspect of this experiment for me was the emotional reaction of my students. They all responded positively, even those who did not take advantage of my invitation to write in their vernaculars. They appreciated that I had acknowledged their home language as a legitimate language within the classroom.

Here are some of the student reactions:

*... a good experience seeing that I have not written like that, or even talked like that in so long. It was even good reading what other students' examples of their own way of speaking sounds like.*

*... from speaking to other students, I've learned that it shouldn't make me uncomfortable because there are lots of educated people who do freewriting (in vernaculars) and even pub(lish) it in there books.*

*At the beginning of the assignment, I thought it was difficult but as I began to write, everything began to flow. It was a different assignment, and I enjoy doing.*

All of the students who participated finished the course with a grade of C or better and wrote about various aspects of the subject matter in the course with adequate proficiency in Standard English.

Even students who wrote in different languages than English responded well: *"... me he sentido muy comodo escribiendo en mi lengage o idoma (espanol). Ya que encuentro mas ideas que discutir en dicho*

*tema."* Translated into English, this could mean: "I feel confident (comfortable) writing in Spanish, which is my language. Since I find more ideas to discuss on such topics. . . ."

### Summary

In summary, the process of writing in vernaculars and finalizing in standard form seemed to be, after some initial reluctance, welcomed by my students. My intuitive feeling about the process was that they were able to express their thoughts more proficiently in Standard English after drafting in their vernaculars, but I could not prove this from this small experiment. What was significant was my students' positive reaction to having their home language acknowledged in the classroom setting. I believe political and sociological implications of suppression of vernacular Englishes in school communities and the devaluing of the students' cultures and identities is not an insignificant factor in the reluctance of these students to perform in standard form. The technique of inviting students to write in their vernaculars is a nurturing one that should be explored to honor the students' cultures and make them feel included in the classroom community.

This little experiment suggests other areas of research and other teaching strategies. Students may be invited to write in their vernaculars in a variety of genres, writing drafts in vernacular and then translating these into standard form; or students may draft in vernaculars, put these drafts away, and then create another draft in standard form; or they may write poetry in the vernacular, leaving the final draft unconverted to Standard English. They can also tape vernacular-based conversations at home, analyzing them in groups and converting them to standard written form.

I encourage other teachers who work with speakers of vernacular English to build on what I have suggested here. I believe they will be rewarded, as I was, with student writing no longer limited to "flat and distant" prose constructions, but rather, with writing that breathes with personal voice and vibrant language.

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