

Towards a Plurilingual Pedagogy in Foreign Language Education in an Anglophone Creole Context

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Abstract: This article proposes a plurilingual pedagogical approach, which encompasses the use of the L1 (Jamaican Creole), the L2 (Standard Jamaican English), and the target language (e.g., Spanish) for the teaching of foreign languages in Jamaica. I discuss the problem of the dominant use of English in foreign language classrooms to the exclusion of Jamaican Creole and I argue that the use of plurilingual strategies and the introduction of plurilingual textbooks unique to the Jamaican context will foster greater proficiency and fluidity across all three languages. I also propose the need for teacher training in plurilingual pedagogy in order to improve language awareness in the teachers themselves so that they can model plurilingual strategies for students.

Keywords: plurilingual, creole, foreign language

Introduction

The past few decades have seen a paradigm shift in the area of second language education. Researchers are now challenging the traditional monolingual approaches which are grounded in the separation and compartmentalization of languages (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014). Such traditional monolingual approaches assume that when the target language is used as the sole medium of instruction, learners have a completely immersive experience and the chances of acquiring a higher level of proficiency in the target language are greater (Brook-Lewis, 2009; Widdowson 2003). Researchers have now reoriented towards a plurilingual approach that embraces the linguistic backgrounds and identities of second language learners (Piccardo et al., 2021). This paper asserts that foreign language education in the Jamaican context necessitates the use of a fully plurilingual approach in order to foster heightened overall language awareness and build a greater appreciation for learners' plurilingual abilities and greater proficiency levels across all three languages involved. I begin by describing the unique and complex language situation of Jamaica. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of plurilingualism and a plurilingual approach to language teaching. Following this, I present and discuss strategies and steps that can be utilized in the foreign language classroom in Jamaica to reflect a fully plurilingual approach.

Statement of the Problem

The current linguistic situation in Jamaica is such that it consists of Jamaican Creole (JC) and Standard Jamaican English (SJE). There are two major approaches that have been taken to characterize this linguistic situation. Firstly, the situation has been described by some as diglossic, wherein a speech community uses two related language varieties that exist functionally in complementary distribution. In Jamaica, SJE is the "official and public formal language," and JC is the "language of private and informal interaction" (Devonish, 2003, p. 159). This diglossic relationship between the two languages is accompanied by varying and evolving attitudes, wherein SJE is traditionally viewed as the language of the educated and as a means of upward social mobility. JC, on the other hand, is traditionally regarded as broken or incorrect English and is often viewed in a negative light by its native speakers. In addition to being characterized as diglossic, the language situation in Jamaica has also been described as a continuum that exists between the two varieties. At one end of the continuum is JC, in the form that most resembles the substrate languages (i.e., the West African languages that were spoken by slaves), and at the other end of the continuum is SJE, a variety of English derived from British English. Between these polar varieties, there are a number of intermediate varieties that are referred to collectively as the mesolect (Alleyne, 1980; DeCamp, 1971; Devonish, 2003; Rickford, 1987).

Regardless of whether one chooses to describe the situation in Jamaica as a creole continuum or as diglossic, when considering Jamaican students in a classroom setting learning a foreign language, there are three languages that come into play: JC, English, and the target language (e.g., Spanish). However, as Ramsay (2015) observes, most Jamaican students "grow up hearing only Jamaican Creole in the home and only a small number live in homes in which Standard Jamaican English is spoken" (p. 28). It is against this backdrop that one sees a serious problem presenting itself in the foreign language classrooms in Jamaica. In such classrooms, SJE is the predominant language used by teachers; that is, these teachers rely mostly on a comparison between Spanish and English to the exclusion of JC, the first language (L1) of most Jamaican children.

A Plurilingual Pedagogy in the Jamaican Context

Considering the above description of the linguistic situation in Jamaica, a plurilingual approach to language teaching could serve as a useful pedagogical approach in the given context. A plurilingual approach to language teaching stems from plurilingualism as a theoretical framework which, rather than focusing on the separation and compartmentalization of languages in speakers of multiple languages, considers the individual to be in possession of one repertoire that may consist of several languages, language varieties, and cultural experiences (Galante et al., 2020). With this view, a plurilingual approach to language teaching capitalizes on students' linguistic repertoire and pushes for including students' entire linguistic repertoire in the teaching of foreign languages and second languages, thereby developing students' overall plurilingual competence.

Superficially, foreign language education in Jamaica can be considered to have some plurilingual elements, given the fact that many teachers rely heavily on the use of English in the classrooms (Bankay, 2007; Cooper, 2008). However, a truly plurilingual approach embraces the entire linguistic repertoire, not just parts of it. In other words, all previously acquired languages or language varieties must be taken into consideration and, in this context, JC is embedded in the repertoire of these learners. In what follows, I recommend some strategies which can be adapted to the Jamaican foreign language classroom to fully promote a plurilingual instructional method that incorporates JC, SJE, and Spanish.

Traditionally, translation has not been regarded as a best practice in monolingual classrooms. Cook (2009) discusses several reasons why it has been rejected as a pedagogical tool, one of the most notable reasons being its association with more traditional methods of language teaching, such as the grammar-translation method. Through a plurilingual lens, however, not only is translation seen as a useful tool, but it is also a tool that is highly recommended by researchers who embrace a plurilingual paradigm (e.g., Galante, 2021). While it is a common practice for foreign language teachers in Jamaica to draw on translation as a tool, activity, or strategy in language classrooms, the kind of translation used is usually a one-way translation, that is, mostly from English to Spanish. In keeping with plurilingualism, I recommend including JC in the formula wherein learners use their entire repertoire to translate from JC to Spanish, Spanish to JC, Spanish to English, and English to Spanish. Not only could such an activity validate the usually negatively perceived L1 (i.e., JC), but it could help to facilitate the noticing of grammatical features and lexical items, which, according to Schmidt (2010), is necessary for language learning. Schmidt notes that in order for any linguistic feature to be learned, it must be noticed, or consciously registered. As highlighted by Cook (2010), there is the view that translation activities are not particularly engaging. However, translation in a foreign classroom does not necessarily have to support a grammar-translation method, whereby learners are expected to translate a set of sentences or phrases that are invented by the teacher. Some engaging recommendations for more advanced learners in the Jamaican context could involve translating popular Jamaican songs in JC to English and Spanish, and also creating Spanish subtitles for a popular television programme in which both JC and English are used. Learners of a lower proficiency level could engage in activities that require them to translate Spanish proverbs to English and suggest an equivalent proverb in JC.

Another strategy that has been recommended by those promoting a plurilingual approach to language teaching involves a cross-linguistic analysis of the languages in the plurilingual repertoire (e.g., Ballinger, 2013; Horst et al., 2010; Woll & Paquet, 2021). In order for students to grasp the facilitative and non-facilitative effects of JC and English, this strategy can be used as it may serve to increase their language awareness across the three languages. Cross-linguistic analysis involves a comparison of features across the previously acquired languages and the target language. As an example of how this could be implemented, consider beginner learners of Spanish who are learning about sentence negation and adjective use. In both Spanish and JC, negation occurs before the verb, while in English, negation occurs after the verb. The cross-linguistic analysis task might begin with learners receiving large quantities of target language input in the form of both written and verbal language; for example, related to the topic *Mi pareja ideal*, in which people describe their ideal partner using both positive and negative sentences. Following this, the students could be provided with an image that would elicit sentences of a similar nature, but which would require them to write these sentences using all the languages in their repertoire. Whole class or group discussions could ensue about the structural similarities and differences of all three languages in this regard. The use of an activity like this in the Jamaican context does not only promote language awareness, but after having recognized that some features of JC are transferable to Spanish, it might encourage students to value their L1 as a legitimate language in its own right, despite the negative attitudes associated with it.

Beyond the use of plurilingual strategies in the classroom by teachers, I also call for foreign language textbooks to be designed to suit the unique linguistic and cultural context of Jamaica. Most textbooks that are used in Jamaican foreign language classrooms are designed for students whose native language is English (Davy, 2018). Consequently, these textbooks ignore certain areas of grammar and vocabulary that would require special attention as L1 speakers of JC learning foreign languages. The textbooks that I propose here should not only be culturally relevant but should also facilitate a plurilingual pedagogy by including a comparison of linguistic features across all three languages and by including activities, such as those discussed earlier related to translation.

Challenges in Utilizing a Plurilingual Pedagogy

Although the potential benefits of a plurilingual education in Jamaica are clear, there are initial steps that need to be taken if the pedagogical approach is to be truly effective. Firstly, the teachers' attitude and readiness to apply a plurilingual pedagogy would have to be a positive one. They should be willing to accept and identify JC as a language. They should understand that the students they teach have two languages available to them and they should therefore capitalize on these languages to build their plurilingual competence. There is also a need for language awareness among teachers themselves of foreign languages. The need for this type of knowledge is emphasized by Andrews (1999), who notes that, while proficiency in a foreign language is important, also as important for the professionalism of any foreign language teacher who is knowledgeable about the language. I extend this to include not just language awareness of the foreign language and English, but also, language awareness of JC (Davy, 2018).

Teacher education programs would be a good place to initiate the steps mentioned above. They should prepare foreign language teachers to address the issues of language awareness in students by offering courses that focus specifically on teacher language awareness across all three languages. These institutions should also expose foreign language teachers to courses that explore issues in Creole linguistics. Such courses would introduce foreign language teachers to the distinguishing features of JC which make it a language. The steps towards a plurilingual pedagogy do not end with initial teacher education, however. Ongoing professional development and training for in-service foreign language teachers are necessary. This way, they can feel supported and empowered with the knowledge and pedagogical strategies necessary for a plurilingual pedagogy. These steps will encourage teachers to reconsider their positions and attitudes and move towards accepting and identifying JC as a language in its own right, not just as a broken, inferior form of English. With this type of mindset and plurilingual knowledge and ability, teachers will be better equipped to develop the plurilingual competencies of their students.

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is no easy feat, especially if the learner's native language is excluded from the process. Choosing to use a fully plurilingual approach in language teaching in foreign language classrooms could assist in increasing proficiency in the foreign language and the previously acquired languages of the students. It could also position students as true language architects (Flores, 2020) who feel empowered to leverage their entire plurilingual repertoire in order to make meaning and achieve various communicative ends without experiencing feelings of shame.

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