Chapter 16

Consolidating Commonalities in Language and Literacy to Inform Policy: Bridging Research Cultures in the Multilingual English–Speaking Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates how literacy and language planning and policy (LPP) research may be consolidated to inform recommendations for local language policy development and pedagogical literacy instruction in the English-speaking Caribbean region. To achieve this goal, we first identify patterns in literacy research across countries and contexts in the English-speaking Caribbean region, noting assumptions underlying the literature. We then discuss the ways in which language use evolved in one of these English-speaking Caribbean countries, noting the impact of historical and global forces. In presenting St. Lucia as a critical case where Language Planning and Policy (LPP) research, and particularly, the ways in which the historical epochs in which this research has been undertaken influenced the evolution of language use in the country, we identify strategic, epistemological and macro sociopolitical insights emanating from our discussions of language use in this Majority World nation.

INTRODUCTION

The prominence of English as a global language is openly acknowledged. In 2014, approximately 341 million individuals worldwide spoke English as a first language, and more than 128 million were speakers of English as a second language (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2014). Though an unofficial standard language for countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, 83 countries across the globe recognize English as an official language while individuals in 105

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additional countries speak the language. Admittedly, the standard variety of this language has been ascribed more privilege than its non-standard counterparts. A review of the history of World Englishes (Bolton, 2005; Kachru, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2007; McArthur, 1998) across international contexts reveals that non-standard English varieties have undergone significant levels of stigmatization and received little acceptance within the academic arena (Craig, 2006; Siegel, 1997; 1999; 2002; 2005; Simmons-McDonald, 2004). Despite increasingly becoming acceptable languages for international communication throughout the world (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages; TESOL, 2008), linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah & Said, 2011) continues to designate Standard English as a language of power (Crystal, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages: TESOL, 2008). For learners in these countries who utilize the language to participate in the global community, English imperialism is no longer a mere circumstance, but rather, a phenomenon to be grappled with if they must achieve literate and academic proficiency (TESOL, 2008).

There is a general consensus that English learners require adequate time, appropriate levels of support, balanced instruction, and cultural understanding of resources or materials if they are to cultivate requisite literacy skills (International Reading Association: IRA, 2001; TESOL, 2008). Despite indications that reading in a second language reflects many underlying reading processes of a student’s first language, evidence suggests that second language reading consists of processes uniquely different from those in a student’s first language (L1) (August & Shanahan, 2006; Bernhardt, 2005; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Koda, 2007). Many have long insisted that the home language be the vehicle through which literacy instruction is provided in schools (e.g., Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Yet in numerous international multilingual contexts, the academic conditions in which the teaching and learning of English literacy are embedded continue to be questionable with regards to the extent to which they draw on the historical backgrounds, social contexts, and language varieties (Armstrong & Campos, 2002) that support language learners’ literacy success. For students who must contend with the acquisition of Standard English proficiency, learning English in these contexts and developing literacy skills in academic situations where English is also the language of schooling creates a challenge.

One international multilingual context in which students face this challenge is the English-speaking Caribbean. In this context, language variations range from English-based vernaculars to French and Spanish-based Creoles. For the greater half of the past century, literacy teaching and learning has been influenced largely by linguistic and cultural factors emanating from the region’s rich historical, linguistic and colonial past (Alleyne, 1961, 1994; Carrington, 1969; Midgett, 1970; St. Hilaire, 2007, 2009, 2011). This historical antecedent has led to the situation where students are required to read and write in the de facto language, Standard English, while simultaneously learning the language, with little to no attention to their native Englishes and Creoles.

To date, literacy assessment measures in the region reflect significant underperformance in literacy. The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), responsible for assessing Caribbean achievement of secondary school-leaving youth in areas such as math, language arts, science, history, and social studies, provide evidence for such underperformance. Particularly, data from this examination body shows that across the Caribbean, students continue to perform poorly on the major secondary exit examination across the region. For instance, in 2009, a mere 21% of the candidates sitting for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certification (CSEC) examinations achieved passing grades in five or more subjects. Moreover, 52% of these students either did not pass