

**MUCH WRITING BEGETS GOOD WRITING:  
Some Considerations for Teaching Writing  
in an Anglophone Creole Context**

*Paulette A. Ramsay*

Writing for academic purposes is, without doubt, an extremely difficult task for many university students in the Anglophone Creole context. The teaching of writing to many of these students is equally challenging because instructors must find effective ways of helping them to become proficient writers of what is, in reality, a second language for them, even though it is not treated in this manner. This paper is a conceptual/theoretical one in which I maintain that the difficulty that many university students in Jamaica encounter in their attempts to write Standard Jamaican English (SJE) is the result of their unfamiliarity with the language in both written and spoken forms. The demands of academic writing are overwhelming for many who are unaware of the differences—syntactic and otherwise—between the SJE and Jamaican Creole (JC). Theories related to language learning in general, and writing in a second language, which SJE is for many, are used to frame the discussions. Additionally, I maintain that students will improve with more practice in writing a wide variety of texts of different genres with more frequency, and recommend a model that combines the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and second language teaching strategies to provide students with the regular practice that will facilitate the development of their linguistic competences in SJE, so as to meet the demands of writing for formal and academic situations.

*In Caribbean countries in which English is the official language, there are diglossic-type relations between the main language varieties in use. In most of the countries concerned, what exists may be viewed as straightforwardly diglossic. It involves the interaction between English, as the official and public formal language, and English-lexicon creoles, as languages of private and informal interaction. (Devonish, 2003, p. 159)*

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*Writing is worth learning... Our growth as human beings depends on our capacity to understand and to use language. Writing is a way of growing.* (Kane, 1988, p. i)

The excerpt from Devonish (2003) aptly describes the complex linguistic situation that exists in Jamaica. It is, moreover, the context in which Jamaican students are required to produce writing in English that is regarded as suitable for academic purposes. The challenges presented by this situation revolve around the absence of, or very little, practice by many of these same students in speaking and writing any form of English that may be regarded as Standard Jamaican. The majority of Jamaican students are Creole speakers who “have repertoires that can span varying ranges of the continuum” (Devonish, 2003, p. 159). Most Jamaican children grow up hearing only Jamaican Creole (JC) in the home and only a small number live in homes in which Standard Jamaican English (SJE) is spoken.

In many cases, students even enter university without being made aware of many of the differences between the Creole they speak for private purposes and the English they are expected to produce in more formal contexts. The classroom, in particular the English language classroom, is usually the only place in which there is an insistence that students use and write SJE. Consequently, some of the most commonly made errors by native speakers of JC, when speaking or writing SJE, occur due to a process of transfer. Native JC speakers, especially those without a proper understanding of the grammatical differences between the two languages, tend to transfer grammatical structures from the language they are most familiar with to the language with which they are less familiar. In this case, the less familiar language is SJE. Many English teachers and teachers of writing struggle to help students produce a standard form that is not replete with colloquialisms, poor diction, and structural errors. Shields Brodber (1989), a Caribbean linguist with experience in teaching SJE to speakers of JC, further explains the situation in her claim that the limited exposure to native speakers of English makes it difficult for Jamaicans to acquire SJE.

English teachers from primary to university levels are concerned about the poor performance of Jamaican students in English language, and there are repeated calls for more effective methods to be found to improve the performance in English (Bryan, 2010). There are some university students who feel that the claims about the need for them to write well in English are overstated, since they are able to communicate well in Creole or through code-switching. Despite their own positions,

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however, they need to understand the importance of writing well in English, not just for academic purposes, but also for the world of work when they graduate. According to Bryan, “the main argument voiced for the primacy of English in Jamaica is that it is an international language” (p. 49). Moreover, English is spreading with tremendous rapidity across the world and, as a result, in vernacular situations in which their formal language is English, students need to take advantage of the opportunity to write and speak it well.

### **Research on Second Language Writing**

Several Caribbean educators, such as Craig (1999) who has done extensive research on the teaching of English to vernacular speakers in the Caribbean, have concluded that English is in the position of a second language and should be taught as such. Although most of the research on writing has focused on first language writing, interest in writing in the second language is increasing. Educators such as Reichelt (1999) and Silva (1990, 2001) have drawn attention to the usefulness of research in English as a Second Language (ESL). One of the most important factors highlighted by Reichelt is the fact that English is a universal language as well as a medium for accessing higher education. I firmly believe that this critical aspect of the research should consistently be emphasized to Jamaican university students, who need to fully grasp the importance of writing well in SJE. Moreover, if we accept that many Jamaican university students are learning to write in a second language, then it is critical for writing instructors to bear in mind some of the social and cognitive factors that may affect the development of writing skills among their students.

### **Attitude and Motivation**

Attitude and motivation are two critical factors that can have tremendous effects on language learning. Attitude refers to the beliefs and disposition to behave in a certain way, while motivation refers to the learner's orientation regarding the goal of learning a second language. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, which was designed to account for the role of social factors in language acquisition, classifies motivation into two types: integrative motivation and instructional motivation. *Integrative motivation* involves the desire to learn a second language because the individual likes the people that speak the language, admires the culture, and has a desire to become familiar with or integrated into the society in which the language is used. In contrast, *instrumental motivation* involves the desire to learn the language in order to obtain

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something practical from the experience, for example, meeting the requirements for school, job opportunities, and so on. With this understanding of how students' writing may be inhibited by cognitive factors, every effort should be made to get university students to become motivated on both integrative and instructional levels. University students in Jamaica should not be allowed to lose sight of the centrality of writing to their future careers and goals, and, as such, any programme developed for them must help them to develop positive attitudes towards writing in English.

### **Towards a Definition of Writing**

Writing is a cognitive process that involves different mental operations. Anderson's (1985) model of language production, which can be applied to both speaking and writing in a second language, divides writing into three stages: construction, transformation, and execution. *Construction* refers to how the writer plans what he or she is going to write, by using strategies such as brainstorming, using mind maps, or making outlines. *Transformation* involves the application of rules to transform intended meanings into the form of a message during the process of composition and revision, and *execution* involves the actual writing process.

Several researchers have highlighted the links between first and second language writing (Raimes, 1985), while some studies have revealed that second language writers employ many of the strategies that they use for writing in their native language to assist them when writing in a second language (Edelsky, 1982; Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1985). In his overview of research on the second language writing process, Krapels (1990) concluded that the lack of competence in writing in a second language results more from lack of competence in composing rather than a lack of linguistic competence. Similarly, Friedlander (1990) maintains that "students who have not developed good strategies for writing in their first language will not have appropriate strategies to transfer to their second language" (p. 109).

The preceding debate on the link between first and second language writing underlines the dilemma that Jamaican students face, since they do not have a writing culture in Creole. In other words, while they may be very proficient in the oral production of Creole, there is no tradition of learning to write well or effectively in Creole; in fact, Creole is hardly ever written by Jamaican students. Consequently, Jamaican university students do not benefit from this symbiosis or "synergy" that educators believe exists between writing in the first language and second language writing. But this does not mean that it is impossible to teach Jamaican

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university students to write well. In fact, not all educators embrace this notion of how first language writing helps second language writing. Indeed, Kroll (1990) cautions that “it should not be presumed that the act of writing in one’s first language is the same as the act of writing in one’s second language” (p. 2). Kroll further notes that writing in a second language is even more complex since the second language learners’ ability to master writing skills is compounded by the inherent difficulties in learning a foreign language.

#### **“Skill-using” or “Skill-getting”?**

There is no doubt that developing writing proficiency in English is a tremendous challenge for many Jamaican students, since in the context of second language learning, when students grapple with deciding what belongs in which language, it is even more difficult. Rivers (1987) regards writing as a group of activities that can be classified as “skill-getting” or “skill using.” *Skill-getting* refers to the learning of convention (for example, grammar, mechanisms), while *skill-using* refers to using these codes for expressive writing and broad communication purposes. It is my view that the teaching of writing should involve both skill-getting and skill-using on the part of Jamaican university students, who need to master linguistic and general communicative competences.

#### **Writing in a Second Language**

In order for learners to be able to write in a second language they need adequate knowledge of vocabulary and syntactic structures, as well as an overall understanding of the conventions of written discourse in that language. Writing instructors can help students by providing the type of instruction that will simultaneously help them to understand the interrelationship between writing in JE and writing in JC, while facilitating the acquisition of SJE.

This essay is a conceptual/theoretical one, in which I maintain that the inability of many Jamaican university students to write well in SJE is the result of inadequate practice in writing a wide variety of texts. Indeed, in a context in which students speak one type of English in informal situations, and are expected to write another for more formal situations and academic purposes, they need to write with more frequency and to write different texts. Writing teachers need to combine different writing approaches that will allow students to write more, not necessarily in terms of the number of pieces they write, but in the variety of genres in which they write. Academic writing tends to focus mainly on the formal essay or summary writing, which many students find impersonal,

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repetitious, and often uninspiring. I suggest that the implementation of a programme which includes the use of broad communicative teaching strategies that give attention to the learning of second language skills, combined with broad Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) strategies, would allow frequent practice in writing, resolve problems of motivation and attitude, give attention to grammatical accuracy, and help students to write better. Such a programme would not only emphasize critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and reasoning skills, but would also target difficult aspects of grammar. This view of the importance and usefulness of increased writing activities finds support in Halliday's (1975) claim that knowledge of a language is best demonstrated by using it.

### **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to the teaching of foreign language that essentially emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. Although CLT de-emphasizes lengthy grammatical explanations, it does stress the five Cs, one of which is comparison/contrast between the second language and the native language of students. Additionally, CLT has as its main concern helping students to communicate effectively in the target language. In this light, CLT is suitable for teaching writing in English to students in a Creole environment.

### **CLT and the Speaking/Writing Connection**

Writing and speaking are both productive skills that require students to encode and negotiate meaning. Perera (1990), however, asserts that writing is not just a means of recording speech, as written language provides different opportunities from speech and requires different skills. It forces the writer to use language in different ways, and these different experiences of language use are then able to be fed back to speech. Writing, then, is not just a reflection or a record of oral competence, but it is also an important agent in language development.

Some experts in language competence are of the view that writing and speech need to be considered together because there is a close relationship between oral and written communication. Others, like Wells and Chang (1990), argue that the relationship between speech and writing is a complex one and that writing is not simply speech written down. While I concede that the different positions all have validity, I maintain that oral practice in English will be beneficial to students who

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do not normally speak English outside of the English class. In other words, students' writing will improve as their speech improves.

Several educators have examined the role of orality in improving writing. They assert that the inclusion of speaking as part of writing allows for more collaboration among writers and more success as a writer. The same approach used in the development of oral skills in foreign languages like Spanish can be used. For these classes, there are structured conversation classes to ensure that students develop oral proficiency in the target language. For writing in English, this oral proficiency will then feed into their writing as they will then write the ideas discussed, in the language in which they are discussed. Students should participate in conversation classes and discuss different topics in SJE only. Exercises should be interactive and contextualized—such as simulations—but students should not be allowed to use Creole in these classes. This is by no means intended as a disparagement of Creole, but is instead an attempt to focus on the taught language in the classroom context, especially since the students are, generally speaking, all very proficient in speaking Creole. Students in a vernacular setting need to hear English in the classroom. Bryan (2010) argues for the importance of “hearing English” by students who are learning to write it. She refers to this as the *Input Principle*. Bryan (2010) states:

The word ‘input’ refers to the language that the learner hears that carries some communicative purpose.... In formal language settings written language forms a part of the linguistic output. Whatever the source, linguistic input is essential to language learning.... learning English as a second language need to hear English every day, to follow the contours of the language and expand on their vocabulary in communicative contexts. (pp 79–80)

Indeed, oral language is acquired in real-life, natural settings through interactions with others. As students listen to each other and develop listening comprehension skills, they are able to make connections between the oral language and the writing that represents this oral language. This could prove to be an effective tool in the writing process. I suggest that students be allowed to make oral presentations of their writing. Once they know that they will be speaking about their written work in a formal setting, they will make the effort to ensure accuracy in the language they choose to use for their presentations.

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### **From Speaking and Writing to More Writing: The Role of Reading Comprehension**

This paper, however, is primarily concerned with giving university students more to write, as a way of improving their writing in English. One important way in which English language proficiency can be built is through the use of comprehension exercises. Craig (1999) suggests that developing comprehension skills is integral to building English language proficiency in students in a vernacular situation. Furthermore, he regards comprehension as aiding in or facilitating the learning of language structures in English. In other words, the more students are exposed to phrases and sentences in English, the more they will manipulate and produce these structures. Reading comprehension allows for closer examination of texts and will encourage students to focus on accuracy as they read and evaluate texts. Students should be encouraged to inform their writing with the structures they scrutinize and synthesize. Reading comprehension should therefore encourage students to write more idiomatic English. Sometimes, Jamaican students write English which is very stilted, due to their unfamiliarity with expressing themselves on a regular basis in the language. Velma Pollard (2003) attests to this when she states that:

After all the nouns and verbs are correct and the syntax is in place, we as teachers of English in a Creole-speaking environment, are still left with the problem of getting students to write idiomatic English. The Creole speaker frequently falls into the trap of writing Creole idioms with English grammar and believing that he is writing English. (p. 49)

Reading comprehension will expose students to idiomatic uses of the language, which they can internalize as they read and reproduce in their own writing. As Pollard asserts, “only by using a language can you acquire competence in its idiomatic use” (p. 51).

### **Writing Across the Curriculum**

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is essentially an educational reform movement that promotes pedagogical and curricular changes to encourage the use of writing, so that it will support students’ understanding of ideas, promote active learning, and facilitate the acquisition of content knowledge in all disciplinary areas. (Ramsay, 2008, p. vii)

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WAC is grounded in several theories of learning. Two of the main theories are critical thinking and constructivism.

#### *Critical thinking*

Theories of critical thinking are an expansion of Dewey's (1916) views that solving problems, or the process of grappling with the problem, enables students to think critically and analytically, and to acquire the skills needed to resolve difficult situations. Other critical thinking theoreticians have expanded on Dewey's ideas to support their view of how important it is for educators to get students to explore ideas and think. For instance, Kurfiss (1988) characterizes critical thinking as "an investigation or exploration of a situation or phenomenon, or problem, with a view to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it" (as cited in Ramsay & Bailey, 2008, p. 349).

#### *Constructivism*

The central idea of constructivism is that human learning is constructed, and that learners build new knowledge upon the foundations of previous learning. This view of learning sharply contrasts with one in which learning is the passive transmission of information from one individual to another; a view in which reception, not construction, is the key. Constructivists regard WAC as helping students to pay attention to the discourse demands as they explore and write in their respective disciplines.

WAC provides the opportunity to draw on both critical thinking principles and constructivism as it accentuates doing through writing. The core principles of WAC work to promote critical thinking skills and develop students' understanding of the relationships among writing, content, knowledge, and power (Keifer, 2009). Indeed, WAC promotes consistent, regular writing. Writing takes time to develop, so when students are given the opportunity to do regular, purposeful writing, their writing skills are developed over time.

### **A Model for the Improvement of English Through Writing: Writing a Wide Variety of Texts**

There are two approaches to WAC, based on important theories of language learning. The first, "Writing to learn," focuses on writing as a means of learning, as it requires writers to explain ideas and concepts to themselves and engage in critical thinking. The second, "Writing to communicate," draws on the theory of the social construction of knowledge and promotes the learning of disciplinary discourse. The

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writing activities included in this model draw mainly on the principle of “Writing to learn.”

*Exploratory essays*

The exploratory essay is very useful for university students. It requires a writer to present the chronological account of the thinking related to the progress of the research for the essay. This would include the efforts to explore different approaches to the writing, an account of the perspectives taken to explore the ideas suggested by a topic, and the way(s) in which the thinking about the topic evolved.

Students are required to use real-time strategies as well as retrospective strategies to write their exploratory essays. Real-time strategies are used during the actual process of researching and thinking to compose the body of the essay, while retrospective strategies are used to revise the research notes and the body of the essay (Ramage, Brown, & Johnson, 2009).

This practice facilitates acquisition of acceptable standards in the language, because the more students are required to write, the more they think in the language and improve their production—in terms of content, the employment of effective rhetorical strategies, and grammatical accuracy. Indeed, as students contemplate and think through “subject-matter problems,” writing becomes a process of “inquiry and discovery” as their thinking becomes more refined and elevated, and this will be reflected in the improvement of their expression, use of diction, and language in general. Exploratory essays also aid in improving the organization of students’ essays, because of their focus on chronology and because of careful revisions and re-drafting to remove “extraneous details” (Ramage et al., 2009).

*Annotated bibliography*

The annotated bibliography is a writing exercise that is undervalued and is not used enough by many instructors at the university or college level. However, it should be seen as more than a list; it is an effective method for getting students to write, develop their critical thinking skills, and improve their use of language. Annotated bibliographies can be either “summary only” or “evaluative.” The evaluative form is particularly useful because it involves writing a critique of the works in the bibliography. This type of engagement in making comments on the rhetorical context of a source, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, provides students with material to write about and the opportunity to practise writing in English. Moreover, the writing of annotated bibliographies requires students to do exploratory thinking and engage in

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scholarly critiques and assessment of the sources, both of which will have a positive impact on their writing.

#### *Autobiographical narratives*

The writing of autobiographical narratives will provide students with useful writing practice that will not only focus on the rhetorical aims of writing, but will also provide students with a genre that may seem less formidable than the academic essay. The autobiographical narrative can be done in two forms. One is the narrative that centres on a significant moment in the students' lives. The second is a literacy narrative that involves the students' personal experience with language, reading, writing, thinking skills, or with education as a process and a social institution (Ramage et al., 2009). I suggest that both forms be used, as the familiarity of subject and content (the self), should make it easier for students to express themselves, use language freely, and focus on accuracy in their use of language as they write. As students explore matters such as how they themselves have evolved, their new interests, and their challenges, they will intimately be engaged with what they write and are more likely to focus on avoiding grammatical errors and unidiomatic English.

But it is the literacy narrative that promises to be especially effective in helping students to write, confront their own writing difficulties, and write their way out of some of their problems. This is so because a literacy narrative forces writers to examine their strengths, weaknesses, and significant moments in learning a language or learning to read and write. Additionally, it allows writers to recount their personal experience with reading, writing, and education as a process. Historical literacy narratives, for instance, give attention to how famous persons overcame difficulties with reading and writing. When students are faced with exploring their own problems with writing SJE, it will undoubtedly cause them to confront and seriously accept the challenge of correcting their weaknesses.

#### *Dialogue journals*

One of the activities that students can engage in is the writing of dialogue journals. Students should be allowed to write and exchange journals about the content they are learning. However, they could be asked to also comment on each other's grammar. Students can talk about the correct rendering of grammatical forms they find difficult, as they read each other's original entries. This activity will not only encourage collaborative learning, but will also help students to recognize problems in SJE, and be motivated to help each other to improve.

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*Summary statements*

In this exercise, students write statements that summarize the main points of readings. They should work in pairs to discuss each other's summary, and would be required to check at least two aspects of grammar in each other's statements; each pair would have to revise and correct the grammatical errors identified in their statements. Again, this exercise facilitates critical thinking skills, in addition to giving attention to the aspect of grammar highlighted.

*The writing of scholarly letters and emails*

In this writing activity, students will create responses to letters to scholars or theorists about an idea they are learning or reading about in one of their discipline-specific courses. This will convince them of the need to use formal language for certain contexts. For each of these exercises, one problem such as subject-verb agreement should be the common grammatical point, because it is a grave error that many Jamaican students commit repeatedly. Pollard (2003) corroborates this, when she notes that, "for every ten teachers I ask what is the most common problem students have with writing English, nine tell me subject-verb agreement" (p. 21). Once students know that this grammatical point is being monitored, they will, in turn, monitor themselves to write it correctly. Also, once they develop an understanding of the advanced and scholarly level of language needed for this type of writing, they will discipline themselves to produce it to the best of their ability.

*Conjugation charts*

Students should be given conjugation charts and spelling charts to consult every time they write. This is one of the approaches that is used in foreign language teaching and should be adopted to aid the development of grammatical proficiency. The criticism may be made that this is too traditional an approach, but I believe that it has its place in a situation in which students need to learn that the correct verb form is important. We will recall Pollard's (2003) assertion that this is one of the major problems facing Jamaican students when they write in English. The writing of their own charts will also force students to concentrate on the accuracy of verb forms.

*Continuous assessment*

Both teacher and peer assessment are recommended, since feedback is important in the process of writing to learn. Clear rubrics and checklists should be developed to guide the process of assessment. A checklist is a

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set of concrete observable behaviour or task dimensions that are organized in a logical way. It outlines the goals for writing as well as the characteristics of good writing. A well-developed checklist can guide student writers towards the completion of a specific writing task. The checklist can be used to generate conversation between peers and among instructors and students. Students can write their own checklists for different writing tasks. This will help them to develop a disciplined approach to writing.

#### *Journaling*

This is a notebook that is used to record inquiry, research, data collected, and facts learned. It provides permanence and stability for students' reflections and questions. It also provides resources for writing reports about class activities and records information gained during lectures or discussion sessions. The journal can be used to provide feedback about students' reporting skills and can be used for both self and teacher assessment. Instructors should always provide feedback on entries and encourage students to use the journal for further growth and development of their writing skills.

#### *Quick writes*

These may also be referred to as one-minute paper, admit or exit slips. They are used to engage students in thinking about an upcoming topic or lesson. Questions are asked before the class to ascertain students' previous knowledge of a topic or area of language usage or writing. At the end of the class, questions are used to determine how much was learned in the class. Students then do their quick writes, which are useful for helping them to think and write quickly with accuracy, directness, and focus.

#### *Writing on micro themes*

Students write key ideas in their own words from reading assignments. These summaries can be written on note cards, which are quickly assessed by the instructor and feedback given to the students. This is an exercise that can help students to develop their thinking skills, while enabling them to write quickly, with accuracy and focus.

#### *Framed photographs*

These are skeletal paragraphs with strategically placed transitions or cues that signal to students a particular way to think or write about a topic or concept. Students complete the framed photograph by writing in the missing words or by creating their own sentences. The idea is to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and the development of

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vocabulary related to different topics to enhance the quality of students' writing.

### **Conclusion**

The exercises or writing tasks suggested in the preceding model are by no means exhaustive, but will without doubt provide effective ways through which Jamaican students could develop greater interest in writing SJE.

#### *Linguistic ambivalence*

The argument has been advanced, as part of the debate on the centrality of JC to the expression of national identity, that there should be less insistence on the writing of SJE by Jamaican students since it is restricting their expression of self or identity. Linguist Hubert Devonish (2003) argues that "conquest diglossia by confining Creole to the private, informal and oral, restricts the ability amongst the growing number of educated bilinguals to express their national identity linguistically" (p. 182).

I agree with the need for people in post-colonial societies to assert agency and national identity, and firmly agree that language is a crucial way of doing so. However, I am also unyielding in my belief that university students should understand the importance of writing SJE, which is acceptable in formal contexts. Teachers of Writing and Use of English can motivate students to develop a positive attitude toward the teaching/learning of SJE. While it may be true that more use of Creole may well fulfil the important role of developing pride in the first language, students need to understand the need to learn a language that will enable them to function more effectively on the global level. Indeed, university students must understand that JC is a language in its own right, but they must be encouraged to seek empowerment through English as well, for purposes of travel, business, commerce, and further studies abroad. Writing teachers must begin by helping students to come to terms with this linguistic ambivalence by acknowledging the role of Creole in developing their individuality, national pride, and identity, but they must also take the responsibility for helping students to develop general communicative and linguistic competences in English. This can be achieved by the development of rich, varied programmes that will allow students to write more in SJE: "Much writing," teachers will discover, "begets good writing."

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