

**IMPACTING STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT READERS:
A Socio-Psycholinguistic Study of
Junior Secondary Students in Trinidad**

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This paper analyses the classroom reading behaviours and literacy culture of 19 low SES students, aged 11–14, who scored between 0–30% on their primary school exit examinations, and were placed in an English-and-Math-intensive Form 1 Remedial class at a junior secondary school in Trinidad. Although there were large differences in reading abilities within the group, poor phonics, syntactic, and semantic competencies impeded decoding and meaning-making for the majority of the students. A reading interview, the students' reading journals, and a variety of authentic reading stimuli formed a backdrop for surveying six issues. An exploratory analysis of 8 two-hour sessions over a period of eight weeks suggests that isolating the students in a concentrated English-and-Math-intensive programme would increase their stigmatization and encourage reading fossilization. A blend of interactive, transactional, sociocultural, and engagement approaches seems likely to promote the best outcomes. It is also suggested that given the students' lack of access to the potential literacy benefits of high-end technology, that they be at least exposed to a wider range of sign system literacies for making meaning from text.

Introduction

The introduction of universal secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago in 2000 has brought challenges to the secondary school system, a major one being in the area of academic literacy. The system has dealt with this challenge by instituting, at Form 1 level, a remedial programme for students who score between 0–30% on the primary school exit assessment.¹ This paper focuses on one aspect of this academic literacy challenge—that of reading—among a Form 1 group in this programme at an urban junior secondary school in Trinidad. The exploratory study

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focuses on reading in the English language arts, and takes its impetus from my interest in the increasing difficulties secondary school teachers of English report. I interfaced, as teacher-researcher, with Form 1-M² once a week from September to November 2005 during one of their reading sessions, for a total of eight sessions. The period dated from the students' third week of entry into secondary school to two weeks prior to their end-of-term examinations.

Description of group

Form 1-M was a class of 19 junior secondary school students between 11–14 years old. They came from working-class homes at the lower end of the socio-economic stratum. This meant that although they belonged to the Internet age, neither at school nor in their homes did they have access to computers or Internet technology. Their first language (L1) was Trinidadian Creole (TC), which has a predominantly English language lexicon. The group was composed of 8 girls and 11 boys who had graduated from primary school in July 2005. They were considered struggling readers and had been put in an English-and-Math-intensive programme for the academic year. The class was taught by an English teacher and a Math teacher (females), both experienced, retired teachers employed specifically to give struggling students an opportunity to catch up.

The English teacher, as the person most responsible for the group, was given free rein with the students' curriculum, and she included storytelling, values, and outdoor recreation sessions periodically.³ However, her remit was to improve the students' English, which she did along traditional lines, using a variety of skills-based texts and a basal reader (Ferguson-Briggs, 2002). The class did Art with their Math teacher twice a week for one hour each session, when, by their report, they drew mainly shapes. The students had all their classes in their classroom in the Home Economics section of the school.

Although the students were ranked at the bottom of the system, 0–30 percentile scores meant that there was a wide mix of abilities in the class. According to the English teacher's evaluation, two could not decipher or decode (males), and by middle-to-upper primary school standards, 3 read at frustration level, 10 at instructional level, and 4 at independent level.

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Among the independent readers there was only one male. Determination of their reading level had been done at the beginning of the semester, using Dolch reading lists and comprehension passages. The class was being geared to be mainstreamed into Form 2⁴ in September 2006 at the end of the academic year.

Questions

A socio-psycholinguistic approach to the literacy situation described, as it pertained to reading, suggested the following broad lines of inquiry:

1. How did the students perceive reading?
2. What would their specific areas of difficulty be with secondary school reading?
3. To what extent was their L1 affecting their reading?
4. How did grouping them as a unit impact their literacy?
5. How would the students respond to a mix of literacy stimuli?
6. What interventions would be most effective in impacting their literacy development?

Literature Review

The most influential perspectives on reading agree that reading is an act of meaning-making. However, differing positions on the process by which readers make meaning have given rise to reading models with various emphases, with four prominent overlapping strands being the interactive, the transactional, the sociocultural and the motivational.

Dechant (1991), for instance, endorses the interactive model of reading:

The interactive model (McClelland, 1986; Perfetti, 1985; Perfetti & Roth, 1981; Rumelhart, 1976, 1980; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1981, 1982; Stanovich, 1980) . . . suggests that meaning comes from many sources, that the reader simultaneously uses all levels of processing, that any one source of meaning can be primary at a given time, that utilizing information from one source often depends on utilizing information from the others, and that the reader constructs meaning by the selective use of information from all sources of meaning without adherence to any set order. (pp. 26–27)

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Dechant lists 10 sources of meaning: logographic, graphemic, phonological, orthographic, morphemic, lexical, semantic, syntactic, schematic knowledge, and grapheme/phoneme correspondence. He aligns this conceptualization to the schema model of reading, rooted in “the cognitive base, which the reader draws upon to match new incoming information with prior information stored in memory” (p. 114).

Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, along with their associates Burke and Watson, are well-known whole language proponents. The whole-language approach to reading also sees reading as meaning-making, but it places less emphasis on “the word.” For Kenneth Goodman (cited in Marek & Goodman, 1996), reading involves the combination of semantic, syntactic, and graphophonemic systems, as readers construct personal texts from given texts. Different from strategies that pay much attention to letter-word correspondence, word recognition, and word attack skills, Goodman’s model of reading instruction focuses on metacognitive, inquiry-based, and constructive elements such as prediction, inference, self-correction, and self-monitoring (pp. 22–23). He eschews the “diagnosis and remediation metaphor” of reading (Goodman, 1996, p. 13) in favour of the concept of readers “revaluing” their reading practice. Revaluation is described as a transactional process between readers and texts, which positions readers to analyse and reflect on their reading, thus giving them a better understanding of themselves as readers. A central understanding is that “in the construction of meaning, all readers make miscues” (cited in Marek & Goodman, 1996, p. 23). The typical Goodman miscue analysis chart codes readers’ miscues for syntactic and semantic acceptability in meaning construction. It also monitors the graphic and sound similarities of readers’ utterances alongside their self-corrections (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005, p. 78). Based on taping and replaying readings in personal study or in consultation with a tutor toward evaluating miscues, retrospective miscue analysis (RMA) is aimed at moving reading from the control of the teacher, while putting it in the control of readers themselves.

Sociocultural models of reading emphasize broader concepts of literacy development and have visible legacies in the work of Paulo Freire. According to Siegel and Fernandez (2002), Freire regarded illiteracy “not as an individual failing but as a historically constructed product of a

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society structured to produce inequality” (p. 70). Thus, as Au (1997), a contemporary who comes to reading from a sociocultural perspective, explains:

Learning to read cannot logically be separated from the particular milieu in which it takes place. When children learn to read, or fail to learn to read, they do so in a particular social, cultural and historical environment. Their success or failure in reading cannot be understood apart from that environment. (p. 184.)

Victoria Purcell-Gates (2002), who also espouses a sociocultural perspective, points to cultural differences that impact the reading competence of groups entering formal education with different literacy preparedness from that required to learn from the print culture of school. In her study, based on a poor White Appalachian community, she reminds:

To learn about written language, to learn that ‘print says.’ [sic] To learn that written stories sound different from the way people talk . . . to learn all of these basic concepts [of print] requires extensive experience with people using print, with people reading and writing around you and to you and for you and allowing you to try your hand at reading and writing. (p. 125)

Like Purcell-Gates, Brice Heath (1994) notes that the linguistic and cultural experiences of children from societies with predominantly oral traditions are in no way deficient. A socio-psycholinguistic approach to reading and to literacy respects, in equal measure, the oral language experience of the learner and the print language that he or she has to treat with.

However, socio-psycholinguistic factors surrounding reading and literacy are more complex than the respect-versus-deficit hypothesis that these scholars raise. With English as a Second Language (ESL) learners whose first language is an English-based Creole, for instance, the fact that their first language shares the same lexicon as the target language often leads the speakers to assume that the language they produce and English are one and the same. Then, too, some Creole speakers resist “white Western” language, deliberately adopting their L1 as an identity

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marker—a purposefully adopted socio-political emblem to indicate their opposition to perceived past and present hegemonies. These cultural identification positions are not incompatible with the acquisition of English as a second language (L2). Current research in the academy indicates that L1 competence can be used as a very valuable vehicle for L2 acquisition. Wheeler and Swords (2004) cite Rickford (1999) on the failure of traditional language teaching methods to achieve English language competence among African Americans, for instance (p. 471). In doing so, they point to the rich cultural and linguistic heritage that children of minorities and marginalized groups can call upon as they strategize for L2 literacy.

The importance of valuing L2 learners' identities, respecting their culture, and honouring their rich language heritage in the teaching-learning process bears directly on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Piper, 2003, pp. 147–149). The implications of the affective filter hypothesis are that motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety-reduction over language processes need to be catered for in the teaching/learning situation. This means that attitudes sensitive to learners' psychosocial well-being, even beyond those of cultural identification raised above, are important; every facet of social relationships that impacts on the quality of teacher-student interaction and peer-group relationships needs to be taken into account. For instance, whether so-called remedial readers should be mainstreamed or put in immersion programmes, and for how long, are decisions that need to be considered in setting up literacy interventions.

In the context of reading motivation and engagement, current early 21st century literacy research with a particular focus on illiterate and at-risk adolescents has tended to take a technological perspective on the concept of “remedial.” For instance, citing Luke and Elkins (2000), Alvermann (2003) believes that instead of trying to “‘fix’ learners’ ... educators should be ‘fixing’ or ‘re/mediating’ the instructional conditions in which they learn” (Section 2, para. 2). Continuing to cite Luke and Elkins, she defines “re/mediating” as “refashioning curricular and instructional conditions so that they incorporate multiple forms of media (e.g., trade books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, visual images, videos, CD-ROMs, music lyrics, and the Internet)” (Section 2, para. 3).

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Although children from working-class backgrounds, such as 1-M students, are exposed to Alvermann's re/mediated world, most of them do not have access to the multiplicity of media she names, either at home or at school. Their access to re/mediation is on the more modest sociocultural scale outlined by Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, and Hoonan (2000), who in their own way question whether reading and writing that disadvantage and demotivate those with the least command of the formal language of school should be the predominant sign systems for meaning-making used for determining literacy. Thus they put forward a sign systems approach, which puts a wider spectrum of the arts at the centre of ways of knowing. In their view "language, art, music, drama, mathematics and movement are sign systems. They represent ways humans have learned to mediate the world in an attempt to make and share meaning" (p. 10). A sign systems approach to literacy is based on collaborative inquiry and democratic principles within the learning community in which it is practised (Berghoff et al., p. ix). The social environment in which transmediation of texts is produced encourages open-ended expression, critical thinking, and creativity.

The models discussed above outline the current position on reading. In a useful summary, Stahl (1997) notes that the various models and approaches have arisen from solutions to different problems (pp. 1–8). It is worth keeping Stahl's overview in mind in light of the polarization that still plagues reading instruction.

Methodology

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a multi-research design was employed. It was principally socio-linguistic, ethnographic, and discourse analysis in focus (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, pp. 80–84, 124–125). On these three fronts, the study examined the students and their reading from the point of view of "the people and process that create the data" (Piper, 2003, p. 25). Further, as a study that sought to "make sense of classroom worlds" (Baumann & Duffy-Hester, 2002), procedures undertaken involved aspects germane to teacher-research, in that they were conducted by a teacher-researcher, were theoretically driven, and were aimed at clarifying student and classroom realities through illustrative means, using interviews and students' work as artifacts (Kamil et al., pp. 7–15). The primary paper-based artifact was a

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reading journal that the students kept, which included pages for drawing. Their assignments were open-ended, and after a reading they could express their thoughts in any way they chose.

A miscue analysis and two reading interviews were undertaken. For the miscue analysis, a modified version of the Goodman, Watson, and Burke (2005, pp. 63–76) marking procedures was employed, in which only the students' substitutions, non-word substitutions, omissions, and insertions were marked on the typescript. Repetitions and other complex miscues such as intonation shifts accruing from dialect variations were not included (see Fig. 1). This means that only the words the readers actually produced were marked. The reading on which the miscue analysis is based took place at the first class session using a narrative passage, and was tape-recorded.

Of the two reading interviews, the first, a modified version of the Burke Reading Interview (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005), took place in the third class session (Appendix A). The second, a closing interview of the teacher-researcher's own making, took place in the penultimate session (Appendix B). In addition, students kept a reading journal and the teacher-researcher kept an observation journal.

One possible limitation of the study is that the reading and closing interviews were not conducted individually. The teacher-researcher wrote the questions on the blackboard one by one and read them to the students, who wrote their answers in their journals. The interviews were done in this way because it would have taken quite a few sessions to conduct the interviews orally. Additionally, because of the restive nature of the class, it was the best way to avoid major disruptions while the teacher-researcher was engaged with individual interviews.

Students who are not strong in reading usually also have writing difficulties. However, as their journal responses to the questions show, the students of Form 1-M were undeterred, using invented spelling to express themselves. The teacher-researcher monitored the two reading interview sessions to help with comprehension of the questions. However, in cases where a student did not want to answer a particular question, the student was not pressed. Wherever the number of responses recorded is less than 19, it follows that either students did not wish to

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answer the relevant question or that they were absent on that day. All responses for any given session are included. Spelling emendations have been made to the reading and closing interviews. In all other samples of students' work, only punctuation has been inserted as a syntactic aid for readers of the following data analysis.

Each session had a planned reading focus, followed by free-writing, which students did in their reading journals. The purpose of the writing was to encourage students to see their own experiences as important texts, and to engage them as makers of texts. Paired reading and individual readings with the teacher-researcher were the two main forms of reading employed, but whole-class read-alouds were also done, and some sessions devolved into small-group round-robin reading. Reading was done in a variety of genres. For example, one session was devoted to reading and responding to consumer-oriented advertisement flyers. A library session allowed book choice and incorporated drawing, and, in addition to a session when the daily newspaper was the stimulus, other sessions included one-on-one reading with the teacher-researcher from realistic narratives and folktales. The students' prescribed class reader also provided expository and narrative readings, from which an emphasis on meaning-making and comprehension drove mini-lessons on phonics, spelling, word study, syntax, dictation, and editing.

An obvious problem was that a group of 19 mixed-ability struggling readers was too large for any one person to handle. However, having arranged with the school and the teacher to interface with the group in their two-and-a-half-hour Thursday morning reading session for the semester, and having seen their positive response on the first day to being taught by a stranger, it was felt that dividing the class would generate disappointment. Another alternative was to have their regular teacher help at each session. However, the students seemed to be looking forward to a change in normal routines. Therefore, the teacher-researcher worked with the group alone. In this study, *respondents* refers to students who were present at any given session. On an average there were 15 students present at each session.

The neurolinguistic implications of working with struggling adolescent readers lie outside the competence of this researcher, and so do not factor into the following analysis of data.

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Data Analysis

Question 1: How did the students of Form 1-M perceive reading?

The discussion in this section is based on an analysis of students' responses to a modified version of the Burke Reading Interview (Appendix A). For purposes of readability, Standard English spelling emendations have been made to the responses.

The majority of the students saw reading as task-based and associated with "learning" school work. Two associated it with meaning-making while one wrote "I think reading is fun." Their responses to "What do you think reading is" included "helping you to learn" and "something you learn." The tendency to associate reading with mechanical contact with individual words was also evident in responses such as "learning new words," "learning to read and spell words," "a lesson to help you read and spell better." Connections with coherence and thought were not very evident. Reading seemed academically driven and extrinsically imposed.

The answers to the second question on the reading interview: "What do people do when they read," corroborated the impression that the students held a task-oriented, school-driven perspective of reading. Responses to this question also suggested that they thought that being able to read well improved a person's standing or redounded to countable gain: When people read they "get very intelligent," "they get better passes at exams," they "learn how to call and spell big words." This is not difficult to understand in a society where education is the prime source of social mobility. One student's response betrayed perhaps her own motivational issues with reading; when people read: they "sleep, sometimes pay attention."

Thus it was not surprising that students' strategies for dealing with words they did not know suggested interruptions in meaning-making and coherence. Most indicated that they wrestled with decoding and deciphering: "try to sound it out," "break it into syllables," "take my time

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and break it up into syllables,” “spell.” Equally favoured was asking someone.

In response to the question to name good readers that they knew, the students named themselves, their classmates, and the teacher as good readers in equal proportion (5 responses each). The fact that five cited their classmates as good readers suggests that, as a group, they may have spent many of their school years in remedial classes where they would have known few competent readers. Also, only two indicated that people become good readers with practice: “they read plenty,” “they read often.” Most of the others associated reading competence with skills-based strategies such as spelling and sounding out words. Two other yardsticks of good reading that the students cited were vibrancy and good articulation in public performance: reading “loud and clear for everyone to hear,” and “pronounc[ing].” Additionally, becoming a good reader was associated with “learning” to read in the childhood stage: “she learnt her work when she was small,” “she went to school and learnt how to read.”

In the students’ opinion, good readers used reading strategies similar to theirs: “break up the word,” and “try to spell.” Only two students cited strategies such as “figure it out,” suggesting that, on the whole, students had not been exposed to metacognitive appraisals of the act of reading or themselves as readers.

The strategies they recommended for helping someone having difficulty reading are a compendium of frustration techniques, suggesting the ways in which they have been taught. These are:

- Tell them to learn to read. Help them
- Try harder
- Teach them to read and sound out
- Spell and sound out the words
- Help them or laugh at them accordingly
- Try to help them; read more than three times
- Give them to spell; let the teacher help them
- Tell them, or ask somebody
- Help them say it, or break it up
- Make them read everyday; help them with their work

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- Tell them the word; ask teacher first; let them read it by themselves to me
- Show them or ask someone to help them
- Make them read it many times; make them spell the word they do not know

Question 2: What would their specific areas of difficulty be with secondary school reading?

A modified Burke Reading Interview (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005) miscue marking procedure was used to analyse students' readings from the first session. An excerpt from a story entitled "Sunday with a Difference" (Forde, 1980), taken from an anthology "designed to encourage students entering secondary schools to develop an interest and appreciation for the short story" ((Narinesingh & Narinesingh, 1980, p. v), and widely used in secondary schools, was used as the reading material. The excerpt was chosen for its likely authentic appeal, since it portrayed a beach scene to students who live on an island and are familiar with the atmosphere of a beach picnic. It could be anticipated that the students would have had difficulty with the reading since they were known to be struggling readers. However, since cultural background and contextual prior knowledge for the story were in place, their readings would provide insights into the links they made between decoding and authentic experience. More than this, it was important to get an insight into the kinds of difficulties they would have with the reading that they would be expected to do in the Language Arts, because after a year they would be mainstreamed into Form 1.

Figure 1 shows the readings of a group of five male students. The reading became a round-robin reading, because of the high interactivity of the class and their tendency to involve themselves in each other's affairs. Since it was the first class session with the teacher-researcher, small-group collaboration was allowed to give them security, and also because it revealed more about their individual and group literacy practices. The section each student read is numerically marked. Their actual words as sounded are inserted in the lines above the original. Repetitions and pauses are not reflected on the diagram. However, as an indication of their poor reading rate, it should be noted that the reading of the paragraph took three minutes and fifteen seconds.

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Reader 1 showed a better syntactic grasp of sense-clusters and phrases than his four other classmates. He substituted the words “blue” for “dull,” and “set” for “sheet,” but tried to maintain the coherence of the clusters to which they belonged. The other four readers showed more severe levels of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic difficulty. For instance, during one of his long pauses, Reader 2 accepted “calmness” for “crinkles” and “sprayed” for “separate” from Reader 1. He substituted both “will” and “were” for “would,” without making sense of the text, which he attacked word by word, showing sight word deficiencies. Reader 3 showed collocation inadequacies with “huff and puff” of the staple *Three Little Pigs* story, suggesting phonic deficiencies as well as a history of limited exposure to print. But, more significantly, his substitutions of short vowel words for long vowel words that would have made more sense in context (“bite,” and “hidings”) suggested a need for him to read in context, rather than in the isolation of short-vowel/long-vowel drill. Readers 4 and 5 showed a similar tendency to call words rather than to make sense of them, indicating a need for a blend of word study and meaning-making strategies.

As a group, the readers tended to have more problems with medial and final syllables than with initial syllables. The substitution of “careful” for “careless,” and the addition of the morpheme “ing” to “play” in Reader 4’s effort, also suggested the tendency to guess words rather than to use critical judgment and observation. Miscues such as the omission of word endings and other Creole features of pronunciation did not significantly impair meaning-making, but showed a need for greater attention to features of formal English.

The difficulties that students experienced with this figurative excerpt indicated that they had not had much exposure to narrative, the predominant genre of the early years of life and school. In discussing inadequate reading skills among communities with little exposure to print, Brice Heath (1994) notes that: “teachers (and researchers alike) have not recognized that ways of taking from books are as much a part of learned behavior as are ways of eating, sitting, playing games, and building houses” (p. 73). In genre-specific terms, the reading difficulties implied that most of Form 1-M did not have adequate schema for narrative, even at the literal level of comprehension. Additionally, their

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lack of schema for the elements of setting in narrative spoke of inadequate exposure to strategies such as the writers' workshop, readers' theatre, and the author's chair.

Sundays
Sunday with a Difference

The sun had not yet risen and in the dull morning light the sea was ^{blue} across
^{cole} of dark colour, it [sic] ^{green} greens and ^{blue} blues ^{mering} merging in a ^{set} grey sheet of water. ①

In an hour's time, I knew, everything would be changed. The sun would ^{huh} ^{will} ^{changing} ^{were}
^{sterd} set studs of light in the ^{calmness} crinkles of the waves, and the sea would ^{sprayed} separate
^{sheds} the shades of green from the ^{sheds} shades of blue. The breakers would ^{hiff} huff and
^{peff} puff against the rocks or ^{bit} bite into the sand or ^{such} search the ^{holler} holes and
^{hiddings} hidings of little fish and ^{cubs} crabs and ^{spayches} water spiders. It would be very
^{invisiting} ^{playing ground} ^{careful} ^{indeed}
inviting: a playground for the young and careless and idle. And so it
always was, every Sunday ^{wearry} ^{package} ^④ weather permitting. But this was a ^{sunny} Sunday
^{the} ^③
with a difference.

Figure 1: Modified miscue marking of students' reading.

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In terms of reading behaviours, there was a tendency toward finger-tracing among the majority of boys. Readings took a long time with many hesitations and repetitions. Punctuation was ignored in the struggle to get past each word. Students read in a questioning tone as if rhetorically asking about the accuracy of the word being tackled. Phrasing was not in evidence, except in the case of two of the girls (sisters) who needed to be placed in more stimulating environments.

During reading, however, there was high interactivity within the class. The classroom furniture accommodated two to a desk, and students depended on their pair-partners for prompting with problematic words. But even outside of these pairs, students rallied around the reader, supplying words with great assurance and conviction. The person who was reading accepted the word uttered by the peer, whether it made sense or not. When that person was asked to read, however, his or her intonation changed to one of questioning, and words were supplied in turn whenever he or she paused. Peer-partnerships can provide useful support in reading activities; however, indiscriminate use can lead to dependency and can retard reading development, as was evident with Form 1-M.

Question 3: To what extent did the students' L1 affect their reading?

As speakers whose L1 is a West Indian English-based Creole, the students tended to gloss final consonants /d/, /t/, and /s/ in their reading. /Th/ was also pronounced /d/. These transfers from Trinidadian Creole (TC) to their production of Trinidadian Standard English (TSE) did not impact meaning-making and construction of texts to any great extent, and so are not considered miscues in this paper.

However, the students' written personal texts suggested that their L1 impacted their syntactic coherence which determined how they made and took meaning. In introducing herself, for instance, one of the more competent readers wrote:

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My name is Lisa. I am thirteen year old. I live El Carmen Rode No: 1.
My mother name is Juanita Valencia. My father name is Terrence Paul.
I love hip hop music me and my friend. Her name is Monica. [Full-stops inserted]

The omission of the final /s/ in ‘years’ does not complicate meaning. But as the student’s ideas got more complex, the structure of TC syntax deepened. TC possession, indicated by the juxtaposition of two nouns (mother name; father name), became evident; and the elliptical intransitive TC “live” resulted in the oral cadence “I live El Carmen Rode.” Further, although the positioning of the subject “me and my friend” at the end of the sentence, and not in the normal SE frontal position, can be considered a TSE emphatic appositive, the use of “me and my friend” and not “my friend and I” are signals of the former being TC syntax, since the TC end-position appositive is usually used in speech in a fragmentary way to clarify, not emphasize, an idea previously stated. When asked to read what she wrote in a subsequent session, the student had difficulty, indicating that the orality which had initiated the writing was distant from her mind.

Beyond L1 orality, the students’ written personal texts suggested that speech impediments, and perhaps hearing disorders, also impacted the meanings they made from texts. For instance, in saying why traffic signs should be obeyed, Candice wrote “beaus you mant get your senf kill” for “because you might get yourself killed.” Without doubt, phonemic awareness is evident in this text, but although she was able to read what she wrote on the day that it was written, she had difficulty reading it in a later session. There are other areas of word recognition that bespoke complex relationships among pronunciation, rote-learning, and exposure to print for some students. Joel, for instance, could spell “children,” and “house” but had difficulty reading them contextually in print.

Differences between TSE and TC pronunciations sometimes impacted on responses to texts. For instance, students had difficulty reading the newspaper headline “3 Teens Steal Vault with Gun, Ammo” because of their unfamiliarity with “vault” in print. Since a prompt to use the news photo proved futile, the teacher-researcher gave the pronunciation, whereupon they scoffed, saying they knew what the word was all along, insisting that the correct pronunciation was “volt.” They subsequently

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read the newspaper article with good comprehension, saying “volt” whenever they met the word.

Overall, the students had little difficulty expressing their understanding of most readings orally in TC, after the texts had been read. However, their lack of exposure to a wide variety of cultural experiences often shut them out of making meaning from print, even after they had conquered graphophonic and syntactic elements. This happened even with texts depicting local and Caribbean scenarios. Therefore, it is not adequate to argue that their reading material should be more culturally relevant. They live in the world, and so they need to widen their bases beyond their local culture, if only because the electronic media that they also have to read, literally and figuratively, contain large quantities of print.

The observations made in this section are exploratory. No deficit is implied. The deep structure of the students’ TC personal texts showed them to be no less adequate conveyers of sophisticated meaning for their lack of reading competence. Nevertheless, since the print they have to negotiate is coded in formal English, their attention needs to be drawn to cultural differences in meaning between L1 and L2 texts that share the same words, and sometimes share similar structures.

Question 4: How did grouping the students as a unit impact their literacy?

Discussion in this section focuses on the students’ behaviour as it relates to (1) reading engagement and (2) the class as a literacy unit. Data from the Closing Interview also inform the analysis (Appendix B).

Good peer relationships existed in the class, but there were a few loners among the boys. Reference has already been made to the pair partnerships that had developed between students who sat at double-desks in same-gender pairs. The girls were the stronger readers and, with the exception of one girl, did not mind moving to work with the boys. However, the boys were reluctant to work in cross-gender pairs, so that the only literacy stretching they could get in the classroom was denied them. Also, the way in which pair partners rallied around each other to share each other’s burden suggested that language fossilization had taken place for most of the students. In light of this dependency, it would have

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been better if they were not streamed as they were for the entire day, so that they could be exposed to more challenging literacies.

Placement in a remedial class had initially brought feelings of low self-esteem. Nine of the 13 who responded to Question 2 of the Closing Interview about their feelings on being put in the class said they felt badly, sad, awful, or jealous when they found out that they were placed in Form 1-M. Five of the 13 had come to terms with their lot: "sad at first, but then normal" or "I feel bad, but I learn more to read and understand better." One girl was vociferous about the treatment by one of the teachers and about the stigmatization of the class within the school community ("they treat us like dog"). One of the boys wanted to be integrated into Form Two right away. On the whole, it was the stronger readers and writers who expressed frustration with their lot. All the same, after almost a semester as a unit, they had bonded and 9 out of 13 respondents said that they liked their class.

The biggest peeve of the girls was that their curriculum was limited to English and Math, and that their schooling was largely confined to their classroom, which they sarcastically referred to as the "office." Their class teacher also felt that the group needed exposure to a broader curriculum, including at least the arts and physical education. The boys did not express strong feelings on the issue, perhaps because they had interests such as track and field and fishing that they pursued outside of school. One boy played football for the school.

However, there was a high desire within the class as a whole to read. They were aware that they had been singled out and one could sense that they would have liked to become anonymous within the mainstream. Most of students were not hesitant to try, and sometimes initiated reading on their own, aloud, when the session began. They impersonated the competence that they thought they should be showing. This initiating of reading seemed linked, simultaneously, to a desire to overcome as well as a denial that they had problems with print. Barry, for example, jumped the gun on the first day, showing much confidence, but his voice petered out after a minute or so. All of the students tried very hard. However, anxiety and confusion about what to do to sustain their efforts soon caused them to participate *sotto voce*.

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In spite of these indications of a potential for reading engagement, students manifested negative behaviours imbibed from a legacy of learned classroom codes. They were very restive and their attention wandered when they were not receiving direct attention from the teacher. As a group, Form 1-M dictated the proceedings of their literacy encounters adversely. Very much like “the bottom group” of McDermott and Gospodinoff’s study (as cited in Au, 1997), much reading time was wasted “in positionings called ‘getting a turn to read’ and ‘waiting for the teacher’”(p. 185). The dynamics of their shuttered environment and learned behaviours forced the teacher-researcher to stop the lesson often “to deal with problems.” The students were “attuned to changes in the position of the reading group, and knew that they could get the teacher’s attention by interrupting during the lessons” (p. 185). Thus they ended up lessening the time that they spent reading.

Question 5: How did the students respond to a mix of literacy stimuli?

In this section, the students’ reactions to three kinds of reading stimuli are compared: (1) their basal reader, (2) copies of a daily newspaper, and (3) their choice of books from a fairly varied range, when they visited their disused school library⁵. Comments are also made on a session at which consumer-oriented advertisement flyers were used as the reading stimulus. Students’ reading journals provide the data for much of the analysis. The limited range of stimuli used is glaring, in light of current reading engagement theory such as that of Gee (2003) and Alvermann (2003), which notes the salutary impact of electronic technologies on students’ learning. Nevertheless, within the context of the realistic means available to Form 1-M, the analysis presented here provides insights into basic, literacy-instruction practices that can be implemented to make a difference in the students’ reading habits and, as a consequence, on their academic literacy.

The four readings done from the class reader produced the most cloned responses in students’ reading journals. Students showed a tendency to repeat phrases that were remembered from the reading. Few launched into connections with meaningful and/or personal experiences that would amplify the text. However, where individual students had strong feelings or interests, their writing was more expressive. On the reading about

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sports heroes, Lenora, who had written previously about her disappointment at not being able to continue playing football at school, wrote about her admiration for Dwight Yorke, her local football hero, and continued:

I love football just as he do. But I just don't [know] when I will play again be[cause] in my school [Name omitted] Junior Secondary they have football only for the boys. I dont no why. . . I can* wait to fine out when they will have football for the girls in this school.

*TC Creole for 'can't'

Similarly, on the narrative reading entitled "The fishing trip," Kerry, who in introducing himself on the first day wrote, "I like to go river and catch fish," showed an eye for fisheries conservation. He also showed his observation of "fish" used as a national symbol in the Caribbean:

I think that the fishermen know mor about fishes [T]hey know that some fish are not to be catch like the flying fish. The flying fish is agenst the law in Barbados [I]f you look at the national flag you will see it.

(capitalization inserted in brackets)

Apart from producing little extrapolation, in the four sessions in which the class reader was used, students tended to engage in distracting each other and in calling their friends outside. It was difficult to keep them on task. For much of the time they chatted or got into play-fights with their reading partners, while the teacher-researcher was engaged with individual students.

By contrast, the use of the newspapers was a highly successful literacy event. Reading the front page headlines whetted appetites, and students were eager to try out the articles of their choice. There was sustained attention to task and building of joint-personal texts out of intrigue. A wide variety of readings was chosen. Some girls' groups read four articles instead of the traditional single item that was customary for the basal reader sessions. In the basal reader sessions they expected to be directed. However, in the newspaper session they went through the material, choosing their own texts. Sensational articles emanating from familiar local scenarios drove reading interest. The chatter during reading tended to be extrapolation, as inferential thinking led to guessing words in context, based on prediction and speculation. The articles that caught

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the attention of most groups were: “3 Teens Steal Vault with Gun, Ammo,” “Dangerous Sidewalk,” “Police Stations in the Dark for Divali,” and “Murder Accused Tries to Hang Self” about which Tricia wrote: “I think if you have a had [hard] time don’t hurt yourself or your family. . . . If I were him I will make I trust someone and tell them. He is very much so wrong for tring to hang himself.”

The session at which the consumer-oriented advertisement flyers were used proved the most unsuccessful. Most of the flyers promoted supermarket and furniture store Christmas bargains or advertised pizzerias. There were also fitness and health brochures, and pamphlets advertising banking services. Students looked at the flyers but argued there was nothing to read, although when asked to tell what the brightly coloured slogans said, such as “Let me Loose” and “Gift Certificate,” they seemed surprised to find words amidst the colour. With the exception of the four independent readers most could not figure out the words. When asked to order a delivery from the pizzeria using the menu, Kerry had problems. He could not recognize items such as “cheese,” “topping,” “orange juice,” and “soft drink.”

There was indeed much to read on the flyers, especially in the smaller print that the students glossed over; so that when pointed to limitations on attractive furniture such as “Fabric Subject to Change,” they balked in surprise. Needless to say they could not figure out what the words said.

The unsuccessfulness of this literacy event holds many implications. First, perhaps the teacher-researcher did not prepare the students adequately for the literacy event. It is also possible there was lack of motivation, since the advertisements were adult material that was likely to interest parents more than adolescents. However, their response to the session gave insights into what they thought reading was in terms of type of text, quantity of words, format, purpose, and seriousness. Their lack of engagement in the discussion prompts also indicated their lack of metacognitive awareness about reading in terms of their sensitivity to the world around them, and their political citizenship as consumers with regard to meaning-making, on levels that would affect their well-being as a group susceptible to exploitation.

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Finally, although the full effect of Berghoff et al. (2000) sign systems approach to literacy cannot be gauged from this study, it was tried at one of the sessions. The sign systems approach to literacy does not privilege language as a medium of expression; it encourages students to transmediate text through other sign systems such as art, music, drama, mathematics, and movement. Because of limited resources, drawing was the medium used for the session, which took place in the disused school library. Students could choose from an assortment of texts that were made available by the librarian.

This session was very successful and suggests great potential for all-round literacy development, if done in a sustained way. The benefits were: (1) the motivation of students to interact with reading materials from a wide variety of genres, (2) students' attention to task and collaboration with each other in discussing their chosen texts and drawings, (3) the quantity of work produced, and (4) the variety of captioned interpretations expressed in art.

At the session, guidelines for the students were that they could choose any book they liked and draw or write about it in any way they wished. They could collaborate on pieces. They were to put the title of the book on their representations to give an idea of what the representations were about. Among the books that elicited interest were: a short biography of Jennifer Lopez, books on Caribbean folk tales, an illustrated book on Jamaica, a book on a South African family, pamphlet-sized story books, illustrated books on cricket, and books on animals. Some students browsed but did not choose. They engaged their own ideas, labelling their pictorial interpretations in their own way.

For example, Anselm drew and labelled warning signs: "Smoking is Death. It is Bad. It Kill us. Guns are Bad."

Henry's abstract pictorial interpretation was captioned in this way: The name of the book I am read is Welcome to South Africa! It is a good place to live and for children to grow up. I love you.

Trevor, whose journal entry on the second day of class read, "I fiel vie Jreat at Reading two Mi frend. [I feel very great at reading to my friend.]," drew a perfect crab, modelled on the cover picture of the book

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that he had selected. He inserted the book title: *Caribbean short stories for children*.

It is not the intention of this study to endorse any one approach to literacy, but the teacher who wants to engage the sign systems approach must be willing to shed traditional ideas of class operations. At the session, the students took a while to settle down. The boys, who sat mainly by themselves, flipped pages at first, just looking at the books. Peer influence was leading them in the direction of David, who said he could not draw and he did not want to write. But quite soon interest built up with the teacher-researcher's encouragement and praise. Gradually, students began to browse through the books they had chosen, interpreting them and chatting while they did so.

A wider range of expression and reading inquiry is encouraged by the sign systems approach to literacy. For, it is evident that Form 1-M has been exposed to skills-based training—Trevor's "fiel" and "two" are just two indications. What the students seem to lack in order to read and write better is adequate exposure to language in authentic and personalized usage. When Trevor copied out the title of the story to encapsulate his crab drawing, for instance, spelling and dictation were not enforced out of a prescribed reading for the day, in which he may not have been interested. The astute teacher can encourage peer-centred interest in reading and writing generated by students themselves. Interest in books can fuel study of texts, creating schemas and propelling vocabulary development that a class reader used in the confines of a classroom without resources cannot adequately build.

It is pathetic to see 14-year-olds who are normal in most respects being left out of the benefits of literacy because of language prejudice. The sign systems approach offered students ways of communicating on a multiplicity of integrated levels of literacy development, reading being only one of them.

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Conclusion

Question 6: What interventions will most likely impact the literacy development of the students?

It is not surprising that 11 of the 15 students present at the closing interview (Appendix B) said that their reading had improved over the eight sessions. Three did not respond and one said “I am good in reading,” indicating that she knew how to read all along. The more important testimony to the usefulness of (1) the emphasis on meaning-making, (2) a variety of stimulus material, and (3) wider forms of expression on the students’ literacy development comes from their answers to the question on how they knew that their reading had improved.

By comparison with their first interview, in which the majority of questions on the reading process provoked skills-based answers such as “sound it out” and “break it up in syllables,” none of the 12 responses to this question mentioned skills-based yardsticks. Three students did not respond. However, the 12 other responses to how they knew they had improved either spoke of reading in a holistic context or in terms of the affective: “I read different books in the library,” “Because I can read at home,” “I can read much better,” “I see for myself,” “Because I did not believe in myself. But now I do.” While the students did not expand on their responses, it is clear that they did not come away from the sessions with the view that the spelling, dictation, and syllabification that were done as a subset of the readings were what the readings were about. These observations are instructive in light of reading research that endorses phonics instruction for the junior years of primary schooling, but is silent on the effects of phonics instruction among adolescents. Of interest, too, is the impact of the affective.

Au (1997) corroborates these essential understandings that should be borne in mind for dealing with struggling readers, and indeed for students generally:

Research on school literacy learning conducted from a sociocultural perspective proceeds on the assumption that students need to engage in authentic literacy activities, not

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activities contrived for practice. School literacy activities should involve the full process of reading and writing, not the practices of skills in isolation. (p. 183)

Au also refers to the work of Vygotsky; in particular, his concept of the zone of proximal development, which reflects on the dangers of “the use of fixed ability groups for reading instruction” (p. 183).

Students of Form 1-M are unlikely in the near future to have the technological tools to practise the full range of alternative literacy strategies required to fast-track their academic careers. However, respected reading research suggests that the concepts of reading under which they currently operate must be revamped appreciably to get them moving. For instance, Au also suggests a programme that concentrates less on reading aloud and more on comprehension, scaffolding discussion, discussion of unfamiliar vocabulary, meaning-making, and “literacy instruction organized in a manner responsive to and accepting of students’ home culture and language” (pp. 188–189).

Needless to say, too, the student-teacher ratio needs to be lessened if students in Form 1-M are to be helped. McCormick (2003) cites in detail Eldridge’s successful, three-year, intensive intervention, one-on-one for two hours a day, with “a reader, who previously had profound difficulties” (p. 424). Although a one-to-one ratio for Form 1-M may not be feasible because of cost, the teacher-student ratio will have to be reduced in order to achieve the best results.

In order to give greater prominence to an analysis of the students’ difficulties, the wider politics of literacy has been marginalized in this exploratory paper; however, the impact of the politics of literacy on children’s lives cannot be ignored. In this regard, advocacy for students, particularly at the stigmatized end of the secondary school system, is sorely needed. An ombudsperson is perhaps needed to intervene for those who have no voice and whose parents are unable to operate in their best interest, because they lack enough knowledge of the system to ask the right questions. The range of 0–30% encompasses a wide span of abilities. The experience with Form 1-M indicates that the literacy of children designated as “remedial” should be constantly reviewed in pull-out programmes that operate on student need, in order to prevent

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demotivation, loss of self-esteem, and wastage of the crucial formative years of adolescence. It should not be left up to individual schools to set policy for the children designated as remedial. As well-intentioned as the efforts of these schools may be, strategies such as giving those who are weak in literacy and numeracy, English and Math to do all day are counter to education and human development.

Additionally, advocacy is imperative for this group because both public and private opinion within the teaching system in Trinidad and Tobago are split about whether students who have scored so low on primary school exit assessment should be “promoted” to secondary school. Keeping the students in a primary system that has failed them seems hardly the issue. A more relevant consideration seems to lie in an examination of the quality of teacher preparation for reading that occurs throughout the education system. Also, attention needs to be paid to sourcing neurolinguists, reading specialists, and speech pathologists. However, generations of students cannot be allowed to pass through the system, waiting for these personnel, before new conceptualizations can begin.

One of the more important points that this exploratory paper has brought out is that reading is a subset of wider literacy development practices, such as visual and aesthetic appreciation from a variety of sign systems. In this regard, low-end technology that is within the reach of Form 1-M, such as recording devices, needs to be exploited. This needs to be said in a country where reading in an electronic age still means, by and large, reading from a paper book; where reading very often still means being changed to the next few sentences for homework; where reading is still conceived by many parents and teachers as they knew it in their childhood. It is now accepted that there are many ways to read. Schools must be compelled to open the wide doors of literacy to all.

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Notes

1. English or Language Arts in Form 1 Remedial classes at secondary schools is taught by teachers with some form of reading experience or training. The teachers are contracted by the Ministry of Education and are provided with teacher packages. Many of them are retired primary school teachers. The cadre is also composed of people who have had training in adult literacy teaching. Originally, Form 1 Remedial classes were called Form 1 Special (1S) and a draft syllabus was written for their use (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education, 2001). The summary of work for 1Rs is also included as the last section of the new Form 1 Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP) syllabus. After this article was accepted for publication, the Minister of Education announced that students scoring 0–30% on the primary school exit exam would repeat the year at their respective elementary schools (Connelly, 2007). The teachers' union welcomed the move but expressed concern over the timing of the Minister's release, since some students who would have expected to move on to secondary school in the new academic year beginning September 2007 would not longer do so.
2. No real names are used in this study.
3. Informal interviews done between September to November 2005.
4. Later checks revealed that the students were put in Form 1.
5. The school library was not being used for its intended purpose during the period of the study. Special arrangements were made with the librarian for use of the facility by the researcher for the reading sessions.

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Appendix A:

Modified Burke Reading Interview

1. What do you think reading is?
2. What do people do when they read?
3. When you come to a word you do not know what do you do?
4. Who is a good reader that you know?
5. What makes them a good reader?
6. Do they come to a word or something while reading that they do not know?
7. What do they do?
8. What would you do to help someone having difficulty reading?

Appendix B

Closing Interview

1. Do you read out of class? What books do you wish you could read?
2. How did you feel when you found out that you were put in Form 1-M?
3. How do other children in the school treat you? Do you like your class?
4. Since we began reading, do you find that you are improving?
5. How do you know?