

Jamaican Students' Confidence, Sociolinguistic Background, and Oral Performance in Standard English

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Abstract

This paper reports on research into the ability of students at the Edna Manley College School of Drama in Kingston, Jamaica to perform a poem using Standard English (SE). The task is important since the oral use of SE at this college level is compulsory. This study analyses the correlations between the students' self-reported levels of confidence performing a poem using SE, their assessed oral performance, and their sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds. The data was drawn from questionnaires and an assessment of students' oral performance of the poem. The analysis found that sociolinguistic and educational background and exposure to SE connect to the students' level of confidence in SE. Students' explanations revealed a relationship with SE based on technical skills. This external relationship with the standard prevents them from developing a satisfactory level of language performance at the college level.

Keywords: language confidence, language competence, oral performance.

Introduction

THE USE AND COMMAND OF SPOKEN STANDARD ENGLISH (SE) at the tertiary level of education in Jamaica is compulsory. Jamaican drama students, at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts–School of Drama (EMCVPA–SoD), come across challenges related to understanding the text and use of vocal skills when presenting a given poem written in SE.

Our students will become performing artistes and drama teachers and should have a native-like and professional command of SE; this skill in language use, supports their BA and BFA degrees. Their prospects for professional development in the national and international arena depend greatly on the personal language skills they command when entering college and the ones that they are expected to develop completing this level to become relevant drama artistes.

The assessment of students' oral performance using SE and Jamaican texts, is a main part of Voice and Speech I class that I teach. This study collected audio data to assess the oral performance of 47 aspiring performers and drama teachers. Students collaborating in this study went to Jamaican public primary and high schools that coincidentally present low performance in the national English examinations. This study analyses the correlations between the level of confidence that students self-reported when presenting a poem in SE, their oral performance assessment in SE and their sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds.

The oral assessment (section 4.2) on average did not obtain values beyond acceptable (Value 1 was assessed as Poor; 2 as Acceptable; 3 as Good; 4 as Very Good; and 5 as Outstanding). Students who declared themselves as bilingual, speaking mainly SE generally self-reported high levels of confidence and obtained high values in the CSEC English A examination.

I argue that SoD students' sociolinguistic and educational background and language exposure are linked directly to their oral performance and level of confidence when using SE.

Synchronic Background to Language in Jamaica

In Jamaica there are two dominant forms of language – Jamaican Creole (JC), commonly known as Patwa, and Standard Jamaican English (SJE) (Cassidy 2007; DeCamp 1968). The Ministry of Education Youth and Culture (MOEY&C) in the 2001 Language Policy identifies “the Jamaican language situation as bilingual” (MOEY&C 2001, 23). The two languages represent different statuses in the social structure of the country. SJE has been related to the high status that is given to English as an international language (Kachru 1992, 67) along with the status of official language in education (MOEY&C 2001, 23). JC is considered the home language and “has always been thought of as intrinsically less good (not to say bad), and in every kind of preferment has been correlated with some command of educated English” (Cassidy 1971, 205).

The degree of bilingualism attained depends on the context where children or

adults learn JC and SJE, e.g. home/school, and whether they learn them in the same context e.g. home and school (compound bilinguals) or in different contexts (coordinate bilinguals). Also, we have to consider that the boundary between JC and SJE is unstable because it is difficult to identify the borders of the linguistic and social divisions where SJE starts and JC ends (Patrick 2004, 410). It is common in this language contact situation to hear speakers combining these varieties in different situations, from using some words or phrases or long parts of the conversation, as part of everyday interaction in every social class (Christie 2003, 3).

The fact that Jamaicans do not recognise JC as a language makes it difficult to understand and embrace the advantage of having two languages that can complement each other (Christie 2003, 67).

Sociolinguistic and Educational Context and Patterns of Acquisition of Language in Jamaica

This section contributes to the examination of the synchronic state and function of SJE. It provides a basis for understanding the background of the students in this research especially as it relates to their competence in SJE.

Sociolinguistic context

It would be difficult to appraise Jamaican culture without understanding the relationship between language and its society. In Jamaica the use of different language varieties is closely related to social class and economic status. According to Roberts (2007) “general conclusions about an individual’s speech in the West Indies are reached as a result of salient features used, irrespective of the actual frequency with which they are used” (24). Speakers of JC or SJE can be identified by phonological features and grammatical structures that vary according to the variety of JC or SJE that they speak. The relationship between language and society is still determined by the specific linguistic expectations of each social group and the expectations of the other social groups with which the individual interacts.

SJE is considered a step upwards in acquiring social and economic status. In Patrick’s research in a speech community in Kingston, it was revealed that speakers whose “daily practice maximizes ‘English-ness’” or “who significantly exceeds (his/her) ‘English’ target” are “educated and more explicit in their desire for upward social mobility” (Patrick 1999, 273). This is further supported by Irvine’s research on sociolinguistic variation¹ in SJE, in relation to level of education and social class

(Irvine 2005). She notes though that employees in higher ranks are expected to speak SJE but also to understand JC in order to communicate with different speakers, “the ability to use both is ideal in the Jamaican social context” (311).

At the same time, everyone is affected (unconsciously) by the reality of daily (not explicitly defined) bilingual exposure. As explained in section 1, different speakers have different levels of bilingualism. Shields-Brodber (1997) distinguishes three different categories of speakers that interact between JC and SJE “depending on how great a command of either language they have.” (63). Category *a*) comprises the type of speakers who shift from SJE to JC suggesting a “greater ease” with JC. Category *b*) speakers that have not mastered SJE and “elect to struggle for much of their presentation”. The last category *c*) is given to the educated speakers that undeniably master SJE “but who switch to JC for a range of pragmatic purposes” (63). In my observation this is true not only in informal/formal situations but also in the school environment.

This sociolinguistic situation is an important matter that infiltrates both society and the educational system.

Educational context

The level of education of a speaker is “judged from the degree of his/her proficiency in English” and/or his/her use of JC (Christie 2003, 39). In other words an educated person is someone who understands and writes in SJE: “the ability to read and write it is vital to full participation in Jamaican society.” (Christie 2003, 65). Not all Jamaicans have daily (direct) interaction with SJE. However, SJE is “learned as second language of school, literacy, mass media and work by others” (Patrick 2004, 408). In Jamaica, there is no bidialectal/bilingual education programme that considers JC as mother language and SJE as a second language.² The use of SJE in education is not contested by the users of the education system.

This research will focus on tertiary level education, but first it is important to understand the academic background of the students before they reach college level. Children enter the school system with different competence levels in SJE. JC-dominant children present issues that are related to the linguistic situation and that affect primary and secondary classroom interaction and ultimately the children's future. For instance, high failure at the secondary level affects access to tertiary education and the quality of the work force (Evans 2006, 9).

In the school environment, the child's speech becomes a social marker. At the same time a child's social background creates expectations of the child's linguistic

behaviour. In this way, at school the behaviour and expectations of the children are mutually reinforced. Students' potential can be wasted because these social difficulties limit access to good education (Evans 2006, 41), i.e. education where that cycle of expectations and behaviours can be broken.

SJE in education

In an environment where SJE is the official language, the reality is that most of the population speaks JC as a native language (Devonish and Harry 2004, 451; Evans 2001, 105; MOEY&C 2001, 7). The major difficulty for JC speakers when writing and speaking SJE are “the peculiar linguistic relationship shared by JC and SJE. Similarities, such as the vocabulary common to both, significantly mask differences, particularly in structure and idiom” (MOEY&C 2001, 8). The idea that JC is a form of SJE “albeit deviant” (Devonish and Harry, 2004) or that “JC is considered (as) a debased form of SJE” (Evans 2001, 105) reinforces some SJE teaching approaches and “obscures the major structural differences between JC and SJE.” (107). At schools, teachers will “employ a teaching strategy based on getting children to correcting those characteristics of their own speech that differ from the language aimed at by schools” (Craig 1976, 103). Craig states that this strategy of correcting mistakes has negative results for the self-confidence of the students. Since the students “are put in a position where they can learn only after they have made what they often come to regard as embarrassing mistakes” and also become aware of “the possibility of mistakes” (103).

In order to gain systematic language awareness, teaching SJE as a second language should be considered. Authors like Craig (2006a) suggest that a teacher should understand clearly “those invariant characteristics of English structure which the learner must be assisted to acquire” (5). But the reality of Jamaican school programmes is that there is no systematic approach to developing linguistic awareness about the two languages interacting and they are closely related.³ This lack of awareness is reflected in schools where language and literacy are the subjects that statistically show lower positive achievement than technical, vocational, and business subjects (MOEY&C 2012–2013, 2). In order to improve language literacy and competencies (MOEY&C 2001, 6), the language policy states that the Ministry of Education and Culture should: “Maintain SJE as the official language and promote basic communication through the oral use of the home language in the early years (e.g. K-3) while facilitating the development of literacy in English.” (MOEY&C 2001, 23)

Nevertheless, different authors highlight the fact that children from low income homes, who are not frequently exposed to SJE written or spoken forms present problems with low grades in school (Christie 2003, 40; Craig 2002, 7; Devonish and Carpenter 2007, 34; Shields-Brodber 1997, 61). Specifically, JC speakers present problems in reading and writing SJE (Evans 2001, 107). This SJE-JC linguistic environment constitutes the linguistic and social reality from which the tertiary level students in this research come.

Assessment of Students' English Language Performance

The instruments in place to assess the English language performance of the students are solely written examinations. In primary school, students are required to sit the Grade Four Literacy Test (GFLT) in order to advance to secondary school tests. The GFLT assesses word recognition, reading comprehension, and writing in grade four (MOE 2014b). At the moment of this research and at the end of primary school, students sit the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) in order to be placed in High schools. This test – now called PEP (Primary Exit Profile) – comprised: mathematics, language arts, science, social studies, and communications task (MOE 2014b).

At the end of five years of secondary school, students take the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination, English A. English A measures student's English proficiency in the written form. The oral aspects for English A are not assessed at present by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) but it is recommended that schools “encourage to engage the oral aspects of English A” in the classroom (CXC 2010, 5). At a more advanced level of secondary school, students can also take the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE), Communication Studies (MOE 2014a). The syllabus for this subject “focuses primarily on the development of advancing competencies in Standard English.” (CXC 2011d).

Educational Outcomes of the SoD Students

The sociolinguistic and educational context described in the preceding sections is shared by the 47 drama students participating in this research, and who graduated from high school between 2006 and 2009. Their primary and high schools are in different parishes in Jamaica e.g. Clarendon, St. Elizabeth, Westmoreland, St. Catherine, Trelawny, St. Ann, St. Mary, Manchester, Portland, and Kingston.

Reviews of the performance of many of the schools can be found in the schools inspection reports: (https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=oBzIAiS6fPqgZfkVzOGh1aWRPaXQ2WXFRcnpCT3JSZDc4ejRoeTB1MzJCMTZYkRQTlrc2s&usp=drive_web)

In these National Education Inspectorate (NEI) reports the schools are assessed on a five-point scale as follows: (5) exceptionally high quality, (4) good, (3) satisfactory (minimum level of acceptability required), (2) unsatisfactory, (1) needs immediate support. The reports examine, among several criteria, how well students perform in the national or regional tests and English examinations. The NEI also makes recommendations to the schools in order to improve the outcome of the performance under inspection. A representative example of an urban school which some of our students attended is Waterford Primary School in Portmore, St. Catherine. The 2012 NEI report for this school shows that the results for the GFLT are Satisfactory and for GSAT Unsatisfactory. The report states that in 2011 for the GSAT test, students obtained an average of 51% passes on the English examination. The average pass rates for English on the GFLT for 2008, 2009, 2010 are 56%, 58%, and 66% respectively. They show an improvement, but the report asserts that “Waterford Primary will have to improve its average by 9% each year to meet the 100 percent mastery by 2015” (10).

For Devon All-Age Primary, a rural school located in Manchester, the results in the national or regional English examinations for grade 4 and 6 are Unsatisfactory. In 2011 the cohort’s average for GFLT was 41% for language arts and 58% in the communication task; these percentages are below the national average of 58% and 67% respectively. Moreover, the NEI reports that “No progress is seen at the GFLT” (11). The results for GSAT in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 were 51%, 47%, 50% and 41% respectively; the performance is continuously below the national average.

The NEI reports on these schools focus on literacy results but not on the use of language in the classroom by teachers and students. The reports do not detail whether the teacher’s use SJE or JC in the classroom or employ code switching. The farthest that any of the reports go in detailing English skills use is as in the following paragraph from the Devon All-Age school inspection report:

During the lessons some progress was observed, however a number of students are still performing below the national average and experience challenges identifying letters or making letter sounds. At grade 2, some students are able to determine word meanings using context clues. At grade 6, reading is taught but well below the appropriate grade level; many students are able to identify two syllable words but some are still unable to read fluently. In the upper school (Grades 7–9) students are able to blend the consonants

and use them appropriately to complete sentences, but this is a skill that should have been mastered at grade 1 level. (National Education Inspectorate 2012, 11)

The reports do not show a specific approach to assess the use of language in the classroom.

Primary and high schools

Of the schools attended by our students, there are 15 schools included in the NEI reports, of which eight are categorised as urban (Kingston, Portmore (2), Spanish Town, Brown's Town, Bridgeport, Linstead, and Grange Hill P.O.), and seven are rural (Trelawny, Hanover (2), Manchester, St. Catherine (2), and Westmoreland). I consider Waterford Primary School as reasonably representative of an urban public school that students in this research attended. Analysing the N.E.I. reports available, it is clear that the common characteristics of the urban schools are, among others, middle to low socioeconomic background of the students and middle to low level of parent involvement in the PTA meetings. Some school surrounding areas also present high levels of violence and middle to high unemployment levels.

The reports show similar patterns of unsatisfactory performance in the GFLT and GSAT. Twelve schools obtained Unsatisfactory results on the GFLT, one obtained Good in the GFLT, and two schools obtained Satisfactory (GSAT) results in the national and regional English assessments.

The CSEC results for many of the schools attended by the students in this research are also Unsatisfactory. The NEI recommends in almost all schools' reports that further action should be taken to improve the level of performance in the Language Arts and the teaching strategies in general.

The statistics show a situation of underachievement; the efforts that schools make to improve students' performance do not seem to be enough to obtain students' command of SJE. Moreover, where NEI reports focus on test results that show that the students recognise the sounds and grammatical structures of English, the development of language use for oral communication purposes is not achieved.

Language competences

The educational background explained above suggests that students entering the SoD programmes are not fully competent in SJE. This section analyses their use of language as a way to understand their level of SJE competence when accessing

tertiary level education. This analysis will help to define their linguistic context and will be based on their educational background.

Written versus Oral Language Use Competences

The improvement of performance refers to increased percentages of students passing the GFLT, GSAT and CSEC written tests. Literacy and language testing, being mainly centered on the use of the written form, means that oral communication skills development is largely disregarded. SJE is the language of instruction, but its competence development is independent of the students' capacity to use it to verbally communicate their thoughts with their immediate social environment. The relationship with the written form of SJE is almost "cosmetic" in the sense that by adopting the correct forms, the targeted written text is expected to improve externally when speaking, but the internal relation with the language is not established. In the Jamaican bilingual context, as Hymes (1972) explains – writing about an American background – the relationship between "the structure of language" and "the structure of speaking" ought to go beyond the mere appropriate use of language (xiii).

In the Jamaican educational context, the written text becomes for some students a burden that they have to carry (and reserve) for the written examinations. In the social environment, they cannot immerse themselves in SJE. As a result, JC dominant students do not develop the oral competence in SJE as they do for JC.

Coping with the transition from the written text to the oral performance

The SoD requires prospective students to have English language competence to be able to register in the programmes offered. They are required to present either the results of five CSEC subjects (including English A) or two CAPE subjects. In addition, candidates are required to audition by presenting a dramatic piece in JC and another in SJE, have an interview and sit an English proficiency test (EMCVPA 2015a).

This study is centred on the oral performance of a cohort of 16 and 31 students enrolled in the BFA (Acting) and BA in Drama in Education programmes respectively, during the years of 2010 and 2013. In this cohort, nine students entered with grade 1 (highest passing grade), 17 with grade 2, and 21 with grade 3 (lowest passing grade) on the CSEC English A examination. The majority of the students obtained grades 2 and 3. A correlation between the CSEC grade and the oral students' performance will be examined later in this paper.

Throughout the programme students are expected to grow, not just in their use of language, but in their oral performance of different kinds of texts in JC and SJE. However, direct class experience with the students in this research attests to the fact that the growing of SJE oral language skills poses a challenge for many of them.

Classroom Experiences

The voice and speech classes last a period of two years. I teach Voice and Speech IA and IB (V&S IA-B), i.e. semesters 1 and 2 in the first year. Different students experience different weaknesses that show up in in-class activities and assessments. During V&SIA students have to select, analyse, prepare and present to an audience texts ranging from informative (e.g. newspaper articles) to poetic JC and SJE texts. Sometimes students find some challenges working with poems written in JC; especially the interpretation of the JC orthography and some syntactic features. Since there is not a standard JC orthography, different authors use their self-designed orthographies that students sometimes find difficult to process.

For Voice and Speech IB (V&SIB), in-class assessments include sight-reading of narrative texts, presenting a Shakespearean sonnet and telling a story. The student creates the story out of a given set of drawings. The following discussion is based on my V&SIA-B classroom experiences as lecturer.

Selection of a poetic text. When selecting a poetic piece of their liking from a recommended reading list, students feel burdened by having to read different poetry books; this is true even when the texts are written in JC.

Analysis and presentation of the poem. There are problems when students get into analysing a selected SE poetic piece. They struggle first with the literal significance of words, second, with the interconnection of meaning between the different lines/stanzas of the poem, and third, the fact that the analysis of meaning should go beyond the initial response to the poem, i.e. “[They will] need to develop an understanding of the poem” (Arp and Johnson 2002, p. ix). When presenting their SE poems, students often seem to lack understanding of the purpose of the text and the use of intonation becomes monotonous. In this way the final performance is characterised by a halting delivery with low volume or with good use of volume but with expressive voice and gestures detached from the meaning and images of the poetic piece.

Sight-reading of narrative texts. In general, students do not like to read, and least of all, to read for an audience. Sometimes they acknowledge that they are trying to read the words properly but do not understand what they are reading.

The major problems reported in this activity are nervousness/anxiety and lack of confidence.

Assessment criteria. There are four criteria for assessing students' oral performances: Voice production, Speech clarity, Interpretation, and Presentation. Each criterion is worth 25 per cent of the final grade. Students are informed in detail about the Oral Performance Assessments and the criteria of assessment, which are listed below.

- *Voice production* assesses breathing support and use of volume, vocal qualities (the resonant quality of the voice), texture (harsh, soft, velvety voice), and use of pitch.
- *Speech clarity* considers whether students should display a fairly meaningful articulation and resonance for an audience in order to convey their interpretation of the text.
- *Interpretation* demands that the students understand the text and can convey its meaning to the audience through the use of intonation without effort. This criterion considers phrasing of the text and the ability to create the mood of the text with conviction and believability.
- *Presentation* is assessed weighing how the students use gestures, eye contact (establishing audience rapport), composure, use of energy and reading ahead. Reading ahead relates to the capacity of reading at the same time that they see the text ahead, without losing the contact with the text or the audience.

Some students can perform the text with proficiency, but others need to tackle the pattern of intonation (informally known as singsong). Sometimes students state that they feel they cannot express themselves freely using SJE and that they get "stiff" (without physical expression) in their presentation. They also express having challenges when analysing and performing texts in SJE; they present low levels of confidence (LoC) and diminished use of vocal and oral (skills) power. This was demonstrated when students were asked to select their level of confidence when performing a text and speaking in JC and SJE. The confidence levels are explained by the students as gradations of feeling comfortable/at ease or having specific personal challenges with the language.

Methodology

In order to assess the students' language use, their acoustic material of an SE text was recorded. Questionnaires collected students' metadata related to their linguistic

background and level of confidence (LoC). Students' audio data were analysed and then used to establish correlations between the students' self-declared LoC, their (actual) oral performance, and their sociolinguistic background. Recordings of a JC poem were considered unnecessary since this research focuses on students' oral performance in SJE.

Instruments

Several Instruments (listed below) were designed to collect students' metadata, oral recordings and to analyse recorded data.

- Students' Consent Form
- Questionnaires to collect students':
 - self-reported LoC using SJE
 - language background
- Instrument designed to collect students' phonological and prosodic material:
 - A poem selected to be recorded by the students
 - Audio recording of the selected poem
- Instruments to identify and analyse phonological material:
 - Phonological analysis table that identifies standard and non-standard phonological features.
- Instruments to analyse prosodic material:
 - Consultant's assessment of students' oral performance forms
 - Consultant's quality control forms.

Consultants. Two independent consultants were selected to analyse students' phonological data and to assess their oral performance. They were two Jamaican bilingual (JC and SJE) post-graduate female students in the Linguistics programme at The UWI, Mona.

Oral Performance Assessment of the Recordings

This section provides a discussion on the oral performance assessment of the students' SJE performance of the poem "Flowers" by Dennis Craig (1999). The main objective of this assessment was to examine the students' use of language in oral performance. The way the students use language in performance was observed

to judge their language competence – specifically, their capacity to orally perform the poem’s images, ideas, and its overall meaning and purpose with clarity.

Characteristics of the poem “Flowers”

The poem “Flowers” (see Appendix) was selected for its phonological and morphosyntactic features that can be classified as moderately challenging for the students who are JC dominant. The poem is written in SE, it is 14 lines in length and contains some uncommon lexical entries. Its meter and rhyme offer a combination of semantic and structural elements that present a moderate challenge in the spoken form. One of the characteristics of the poem that demands skill in performance is sentences that run into following lines to continue giving complete images and ideas. Pauses and oral skills to transmit the poem are paramount to render an outstanding performance.

Oral performance analysis

The assessment criteria used by the consultants were based on semantic and prosodic aspects labelled as Level of Understanding (LoU) and Use of Prosody (UoP) respectively.

LoU Criteria. The criteria for LoU with explanations were given to the consultant before starting the assessment. This assessment had four criteria:

1. *Engagement:* Engaging audience’s attention;
2. *Mood:* Creating the mood that the poem demands;
3. *Conviction:* The performer is convincing in transmitting the images of the poem;
4. *Believability:* The performer makes the audience experience fully the images of the poem.

UoP Criteria. These criteria included seven aspects. Three fall under *Phonological phrasing and pauses*, where the performer:

1. *Phrases* the poem appropriately;
2. *Breaks the lines* fitting the structure of the poem without cutting the meaning;
3. Uses *pauses* that enhance the performance.

The other aspects are:

4. *Pace:* The performer paces the poem with insight;

5. *Pitch/Tone*: The use of pitch and tone contributes to the understanding of the poem;
6. *Volume*: The performer's use of volume strikes me as: (Poor, Acceptable, Good, Very Good, and Outstanding);
7. Fluency: The poem flows easily.

To ensure that the assessment of LoU and UoP was consistent and accurate, the consultant had to fill out the Quality Control Forms weekly. The forms contained information related to (1) consultant's assessment task and (2) challenges encountered when judging the recordings. As the analysis progressed, the consultant was able to clearly understand differences among the judging criteria.

Oral performance assessment analysis

The form *Criteria to judge the best performances* was given in writing and described to the consultants in order for them to do the oral performance assessment of the recordings. The forms assess individually the Level of Understanding (LoU) and Use of Prosody (UoP) of each student; these criteria were graded on a scale from 1–5 where 1 was assessed as Poor, 2 as Acceptable, 3 as Good, 4 as Very Good, and 5 as an Outstanding. The values that go from 1–5 for the LoU and UoP can be better compared with each other as well as with levels 1–5 for Self-reported LoC.

Table 1 shows the final assessment values of the students' oral performance that are in the different years in the SoD programmes.

Table 1. Number of students at different LoU and UoP levels per year

Assessment Value	Student's LoU					Student's UoP				
	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	Total no. of students	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	Total no. of students
Poor (1)	6	3	3	1	13	6	1	1	0	8
Acceptable (2)	9	3	6	8	26	9	6	8	10	33
Good (3)	0	1	2	1	4	0	1	2	0	2
Very Good (4)	0	2	1	1	4	0	1	1	1	3
Outstanding (5)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total students	15	9	12	11	47	15	9	12	11	47

Table 1 shows that the majority of the performances were assessed as 2 – Acceptable, and some of the students’ oral performances were assessed with value 1. No performance was given an outstanding value assessment. For first year, no assessment had a value above 2. Second year has three students assessed with value 4 (Very Good) and, third year has four students in the value 3 (G) and two with value 4 (VG), and fourth year has one with value 3 (G) and two students in value 4 (VG).

LoU Criteria

Analysing the assessment for LoU within the four years, it is possible to see the different strengths and weaknesses for LoU only. Figure 1 summarises the average values obtained for each LoU criterion along the four years in the SoD programmes.

Figure 1 shows first year students assessed with the lowest values; year two students with the highest assessment values, and second and third year students with acceptable values that are higher than the ones given to first year students.

The assessment for the first-year students ranges from poor to acceptable. The values, that are not significantly different from each other, have *Believability* as the weakest one. The “strongest” values are for *Engagement* and *Creating the Mood*. *Conviction* is also still in the acceptable range. The second-year students obtained values for every criterion in the acceptable range; this assessment is relatively higher within the same acceptable category than the ones for the third and fourth years. The third-year assessment is all in the acceptable range with the strongest criterion

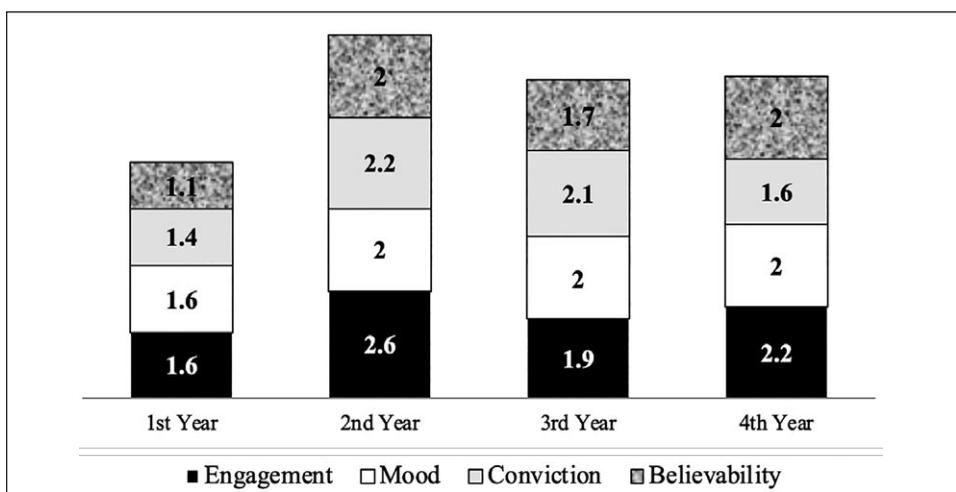


Figure 1. Average values for LoU categories yearly

being *Conviction* and the weakest *Believability*. In the (relatively) middle are *Mood* and *Engagement*. Fourth year has *Engagement* (2.2), *Mood* (2.0) and *Believability* (2) as acceptable; *Conviction* (1.6) is on the low side. Second, third and fourth years share an Acceptable value for *Mood*.

Summarising, there is variability within the acceptable range in the assessment for LoU. Among all the years, the somewhat “strongest” values are for *Engagement* and in descending order are *Conviction* and *Mood* (3rd and 4th years). The capacity to make the audience experience fully the images of the poem (*Believability*) is assessed as the weakest one of the oral performance criteria within the acceptable value.

This analysis will be compared with the one for UoP to discuss the Oral Performance of the Students.

UoP Criteria

The UoP form has seven criteria using values from 1–5 to maintain consistency between the LoU and UoP instruments. Figure 2 summarises average values for UoP across all years.

In Figure 2, first year has the lowest values in the acceptable level for UoP; year two has the highest assessment values and second and third year have similar acceptable values that are higher than those given to first year. First year has the lowest values for UoP: the lowest criteria assessed at 1.4 are *Use of Pauses*, *Pitch/Tone*, and *Fluency*. *Phrasing* (1.6), *Line Breaks* (1.6), and *Pace* (1.5), are in the ‘low’ acceptable; and *Volume* (2.1) was assessed as acceptable.

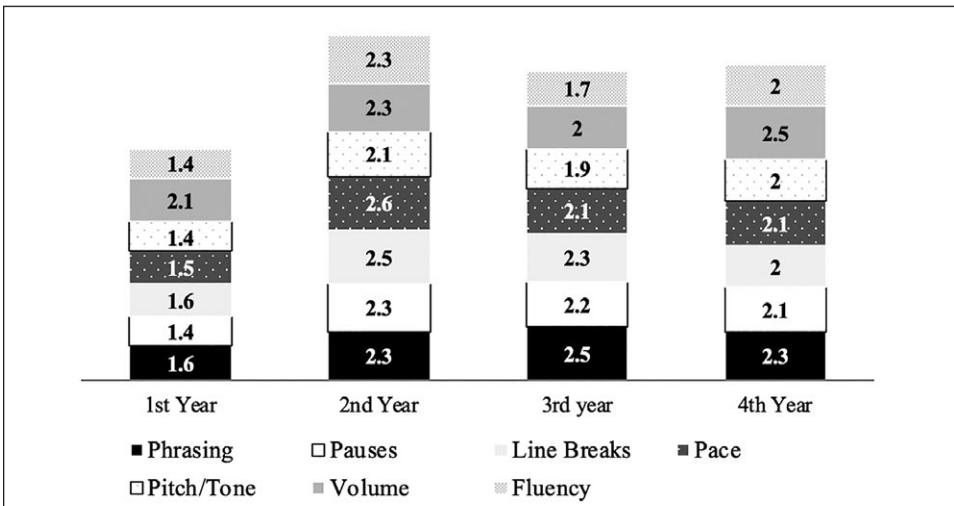


Figure 2. Average for UoP

For second-year students, the (relatively) low assessment within the acceptable level is for use of *Pitch/Tone* (2.1). On average *Phrasing*, *Pauses*, *Volume* and *Fluency*, were assessed within a high acceptable value (2.3). On the strongest side there are *Pace* and *Line Breaks* that obtained a value 3 (Good) assessment.

Third year got *Fluency* assessed within the lowest average acceptable value (1.7). In the middle acceptable we have in descending order *Use of Pauses* (2.2.), *Pace* (2.1), and *Volume* (2). The highest value within the acceptable value is *Line Breaks* (2.3) while *Phrasing* (2.5) was assessed as good.

Fourth year assessment got the lowest value for *Fluency* (2), the same for *Pitch/Tone*, and *Line Breaks*. The remaining criteria, i.e. *Use of Pause* (2.1) and *Pace* (2.1), are within this acceptable scale. *Phrasing* (2.3) was assessed in the higher acceptable range along with *Volume* (2.5) at the lowest part of the good range.

Summarising on average, all the students are within the value 2 (acceptable) for UoP. In this range there are criteria that are rated with low, middle, high acceptable values and some with low good values:

- Use of *Pitch/Tone* is the criterion with the lowest value throughout the four years. Fluency also is rated as low acceptable, except for second year.
- *Pace*, *Line Breaks* and *Pauses* are in the middle range.
- *Phrasing* and *Volume* are assessed in the “high” acceptable and low good range.

The best performances are not necessarily from the fourth year nor are the weakest ones from first year. Among the top 10 performances there are students from the different years with somewhat of a predominance from second year.

The overall assessment indicates that there is no progressive pattern of improvement through the four years in the programme.

Oral performance assessment – Summary of findings

The analysis of the LoU and UoP assessment allows us to discuss the students’ oral skills development through the years, and their oral skills in relation to language competence. LoU and UoP should interact mutually to convey the ideas, images and overall meaning of the poem but the low assessment values for both reveal a lack of language competence related to oral performance skills. For all the years in the SoD programmes there is a similar pattern of UoP skills. *Believability* (LoU) and *Use of Pitch/Tone* and *Fluency* (UoP) are perceived as poor/poor – acceptable. Students are able to use good volume and identify the phrases, but lack both the skills to break the lines without cutting the meaning of the poem and the skills to

use appropriate pauses to help to convey the ideas/images given in each line. They are not able to use *Pitch/Tone* appropriately to carry the meaning and are unable to perform with *Fluency*. This state of oral skills affects the pace and the delivery of the overall meaning of the poem. All this contributes to an overall oral performance perceived as lacking *Conviction* and most notably, *Believability*. In short, the students are not able to process the text in terms of its semantic or syntactic structure.

The findings in this study helped to point out strengths and weaknesses of the oral performance of the students. Even so, it is necessary to explain the reasons for this assessment, on average, no better than acceptable, and its relation to language competence. The observations and findings of this and previous sections are presented and explored later in the section which looks at the correlations between the different aspects of the data.

Self-reported LoC when Performing in SJE

SoD students were consulted on their LoC when performing in SJE and they had to explain the reasons for their selection. In the context of this article, the analysis of the reasons given in writing by students for their self-reported LoC will not be elaborated, but when considering their reasons it was observed that as the level of LoC decreases in SJE, so did the number of positive reasons given. Most of the students are self-reported at LoC 3–SJE (21 students) and LoC 4 (12 students). The challenges found at LoC 2 and 3 are related to pronunciation, grammar insecurity and not being fluent in SJE. These problems are related to the written form. Students are not used to interpreting the written form orally. The possible causes of this are:

- limited previous exposure and engagement with the SJE texts and lack of strategies in approaching them;
- Students whose environment is JC-dominant not having enough exposure or opportunities to interact with fluent SJE speakers;
- Students' SJE competence being largely based on the written use of the language and not equipped to use the language with confidence in oral performances of poetic texts;
- JC remaining the language of oral competence. The limited use of SJE in the classroom where JC and SJE interact is not enough for the development of SJE's oral competence across the same range as JC.

Correlations of Findings

The correlations in this section serve to identify interdependence of assessed aspects of the oral performances and students' self-reported LoC, as well as their linguistic background analysed in previous sections.

Students' rural/urban high schools and oral performance assessment

The Oral Performance assessments of students who graduated from urban and rural higher schools are compared in Figure 3.

In Figure 3 it is observed that for the oral performance assessments, most of the students graduating from rural and urban high schools obtained values above 1 and below 3. There are no students graduating from rural schools with values above 3 and individually few students in the urban group obtained values between 3 and 5. In Figure 3 the dots below 3 represent clusters of students, e.g. for *Level of Understanding* (LoU), two students that graduated from rural high schools obtained the same 2 value; and for urban eight students are at value 1.3; three students in value 1, nine students in value 1.5, five students in value 1.8, four students in value 2, and two students in value 2.5. Above value 3 and for LoU and *Use of Prosody*

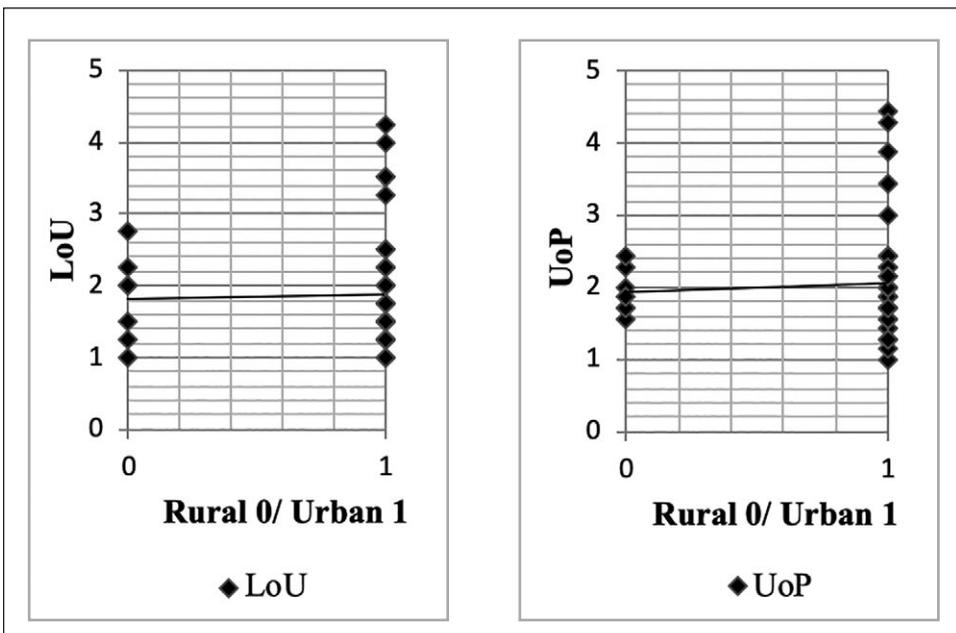


Figure 3. Oral performance assessment and students from Rural/Urban High Schools

(UoP) the dots represent individual students, except in value 3.5 for LoU where there are two students. However, the averages for students coming from rural and urban high schools are 1.8 and 1.9 for LoU; and 1.9 and 2.0 for UoP. Based on these averages, students graduating from rural schools were assessed with somewhat lower average values for their oral performance. Again, however, it is difficult to make a clear correlation since the number of students per group differs. The number of students graduating from urban high schools is almost six times higher than the ones from rural ones. As the number of students increases, there is more opportunity for different placements on the scale of assessment.

Oral performance assessment and CSEC English A

The students who obtained the highest grade on CSEC English A could be expected to have similar high grades for oral performance assessments. Figure 4 summarises the values for LoU and UoP obtained by students.

Based on averages for LoU and UoP and CSEC English A Grade values, there is a positive correlation between the students' CSEC English A grade and their Oral Performance Assessments, as shown in Figure 4.

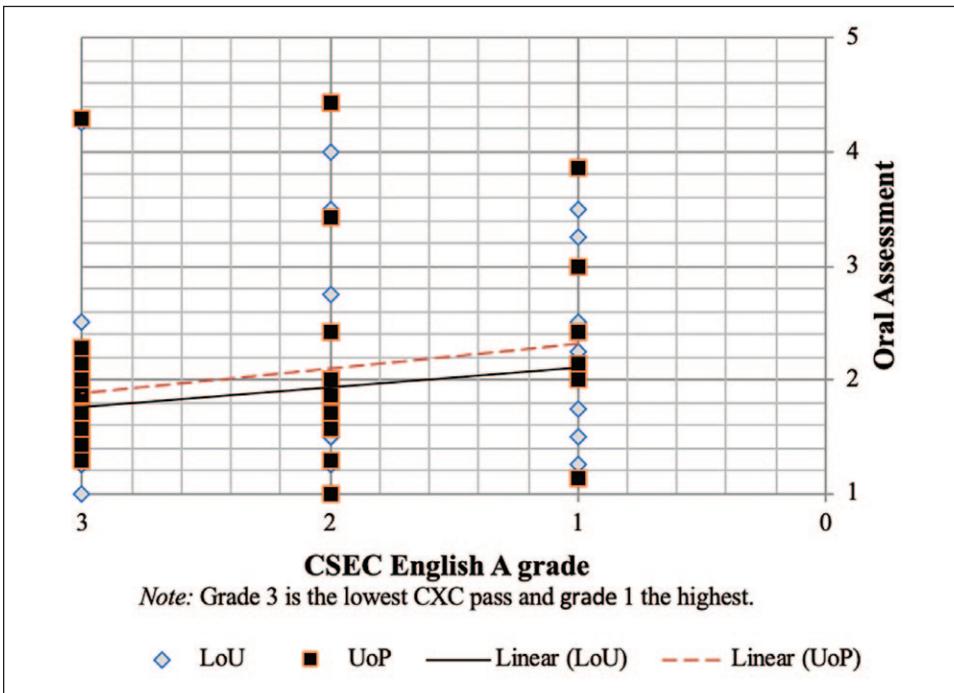


Figure 4. Oral performance assessment and CSEC English A grades

Students who obtained CSEC English grade 1 had an average for LoU and UoP of 2.3 and 2.4 respectively. Those with grades 2 and 3 obtained 1.8 and 2 and 1.8 and 1.9 respectively for LoU and UoP. Students with CSEC English grade 1 were assessed with higher oral performance assessment values than those with grades 2 and 3, while those with grade 2 on average got better assessments for UoP than the students with grade 3 but the same average for LoU. Individually the correlation does not match, since there are some outlying students with grade 3 who obtained higher assessments than the ones with grade 1.

Performance Assessment and Self-reported LoC

The oral performance assessment focused on appraising students' *Level of Understanding* (LoU) and *Use of Prosody* (UoP) to convey the images, meaning and ideas contained in the poem. In this correlation it is expected that students with higher self-reported LoC will obtain corresponding higher value for the SJE oral performance assessment. Figure 5 correlates these assessment values with self-reported LoC in SJE.

Figure 5 shows that low LoC reporting students have, on average, low values on LoU and UoP. The averages for LoU and UoP for LoC 2, 3, 4 and 5 are correspondingly: 1.3 and 1.6 (LoC 2), 1.6 and 1.7 (LoC 3), 2.2 and 2.3 (LoC 4), and 2.4 and 2.7 for self-reported LoC 5. On average it seems that when performing in SJE, students convey a better understanding of the poem when self-reporting

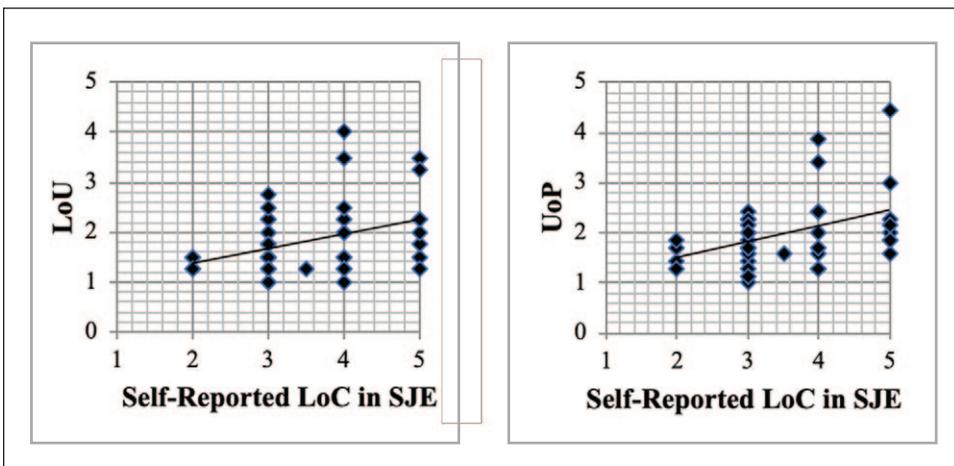


Figure 5. Oral performance assessments and self-reported LoC

Note: The dot at 3.5 identifies a student that self-reported an LoC at this middle value.

high LoC. However, at the individual level the correlation holds only when observing the average for self-reported LoC 2. There are two outliers at LoC 4 and two at LoC 5 that raise the average value for these levels. In sum, the averages are slightly higher at higher self-reported LoC, but there are several students who reported high LoC and were assessed with low values for LoU and UoP. Outliers have a skewing effect on average values.

Conclusions

Students participating in this study come from different parishes in Jamaica. All except one graduated from public primary and high schools, the majority from urban high schools. Their level of English language proficiency, assessed only in the written form during their primary and secondary education, reflects a national situation described as worrisome by its assessors (MOE 2012–2013). The linguistic situation in Jamaica, which is understood as a *de facto* bilingual situation, forms the context for the students' relationship with JC and SJE. This background does not allow the students appropriate exposure to become fully bilingual. What we are doing at the School of Drama to improve the students' SJE oral performances does not counterbalance the influence of this sociolinguistic and educational background where JC and SJE interact with undefined boundaries.

The sociolinguistic and educational background and language exposure are linked directly to students' LoC and prevent them from developing a satisfactory level of SJE oral performance. JC is the preferred language for oral communication and SJE is an external language which is not usually used for speaking to family and friends or for expressing feelings and personal ideas. Students are aware that SJE is not their mother language and that it takes time and effort to learn and master. Students' personal efforts are not enough to reach a high level of SJE oral performance skills that are not just related to external oral skills but to the development of skills to interpret meaning with conviction.

The case of drama students' language use development cannot be taken for granted since performers' professional scope is directly related to their language communication skills. An intervention will be necessary to address the level of communicative competence and develop a language confidence that can support the oral performance of the JC monolingual and bilingual JC and SJE speakers. The programmes at the EMCVPA–SoD need to be reoriented to develop the language confidence and competence of the students across the board.

The EMCVPA–SoD deals directly with performance, so it is here that we have a direct experience of these struggles. In other tertiary institutions educating students of similar sociolinguistic and educational background, oral performance is not a central part of the curriculum. Students’ oral performance is not noticed or evaluated and they can move out of the educational system without major problems. However, outside of the educational system, as professionals, oral communicative competence is crucial in any field and therefore the results from this study should be useful to the broader public.

This research pointed to specific aspects of the oral performance and relationship with SJE of college students, a relationship that should be considered in a future intervention and which also speaks to a national problem. Working within the bilingual situation in Jamaica, the EMCVPA–SoD can develop valuable lessons from their own practices for other educational institutions that experience similar linguistic situations and challenges. All over the Caribbean there are linguistic situations similar to Jamaica that can be assessed methodically. The relationship with the language should be developed with a linguistic consciousness and skill tailored to each linguistic environment.

The improvement of the relationship with the language should ideally start in the primary schools and be continued in the secondary. Receiving students who have, during their primary and secondary school years, cultivated a communicative relationship with SJE, will improve greatly the oral competence of our EMCVPA–SoD students and any college graduate.

Recommendations for tertiary education institutions

Tertiary education institutions should ensure that SJE and JC speaker students graduate not just with SJE written skills, but also with oral/communicative skills in order to produce relevant performers and communicators aware of their Jamaican culture and social environment. In order to accomplish this the institutions could:

- Acknowledge the importance of students’ linguistic background;
- Provide lecturers with workshops that expand their linguistic awareness and its direct repercussion in students’ communicative skills development;
- Design courses to empower students to develop their linguistic status;
- Create spaces to explore and develop communication skills and their importance in students’ professional development.

Recommendations for the MOE

In order to acknowledge the synchronic linguistic status of the users of the educational system and its potential, the Ministry of Education should review:

- The current monoliterate language approach to teaching in order to accommodate new research findings related to improving students' language competence in a bilingual environment;
- The primary and secondary school programmes that should be centred in an SJE communicative approach that allows students to develop a linguistic confidence centred not only on their written but also on their oral skills;
- Reading and teaching materials that acknowledge students' linguistic background.

The MOE also should:

- Ensure that aspiring teachers receive adequate linguistic knowledge and clear suggestions to improve the students' linguistic awareness and development;
- Implement oral assessments that help students to develop their communicative competence and their relationship with SJE.

All these recommendations will allow a development of our national linguistic status in the oral aspect of SJE language use.

It is important to acknowledge that the development of pedagogical methods to further JC dominant student's self-confidence and self-reliance in the oral use of SJE should be founded on systematic research. According to Coard and Dyche (2013, 82) the "self-efficacy and proficiency in the use of English language" could be enriched with the lessons that universities and colleges gain from sharing experiences and research that emerge from teaching JC speakers. The implementation of a communicative approach to SJE should be rooted in pedagogical methods that systematically address the students' self-perceptions of their relationship with the language. The students' sociolinguistic and educational background and their language perceptions should be part of such a communicative approach and cannot be separated from strengthening their motivations to master SJE.

Appendix

“Flowers”

by Dennis Craig

1. I have never learnt the names of flowers
2. from beginning, my world has been a place
3. of pot-holed streets where thick, sluggish gutters race
4. in slow time, away from garbage heaps and sewers
5. past blanched old houses around which cowers
6. stagnant earth. There, scarce green thing grew to chase
7. the dull-grey squalor of sick dust; no trace
8. of plant save few sparse weeds; just these, no flowers.
9. One day, they cleared a space and made a park
10. there in the city's slums; and suddenly
11. came stark glory like lighting in the dark,
12. while perfume and bright petals thundered slowly.
13. I learnt no names, but hue, shape and scent mark
14. my mind, even now, with symbols holy.

Notes

1. Beckford Wassink (1999) researches vowel length related to the sociocultural context where speakers of Basilect and Acrolect use different varieties. One of her findings was that Gender (without being the main purpose of the research) was an important extra linguistic variable. Phonological preferences for basilectal vowel and consonant features performance were predominant in males, she states that “gender related differences maybe an important part of the overall picture of linguistic variation in Creole situations” (p. 226).
2. It is important to explain that parents who are Creole speakers consider that to teach in Creole to their children “is advocating a socio-economic repression of the masses” since they consider SE as the language of social mobility (Craig 1976, 101).
3. A Bilingual Education Project (BEP) (JLU 2014) put in place by the JLU (UWI, Mona) since 2004 has been implemented “aiming at determining the most effective ways of encouraging bilingualism for the primary level in JC and SJE over a four year period” (Carpenter and Devonish 2010, 173). The results after three years of work have a positive effect for the children and “the BEP delivery did not interfere with their performance in English” (Carpenter and Devonish 2010, 180). The final results will let us know if a bilingual education project can help to improve English competence in the schools.

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