

## **The Trouble with Neketa: Drama as a Force in Early Childhood Professional Training Programmes**

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### **Abstract**

*Children's Creole language or mother tongue is usually rejected in Early Childhood settings in Guyana. This practice of rejecting children's home language breaches the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child which promotes the principle of development of and respect for the children's language. More significantly, this practice contradicts developmentally appropriate early childhood learning experiences which dictates that children's home language is probably the best medium for early interactions. Empirical study has attributed this problem to lack of sociolinguistic knowledge of Creole and limited pedagogical training [1]. In light of this finding, in 2010, the University of Guyana made a deliberate attempt to advance knowledge about Creole acceptance and appreciation when the first early childhood professional development training programme was introduced. This research paper examines the impact the training programme made on participants' interaction experiences with Guyanese Creole speaking children. It highlights how participants' knowledge of language acceptance principles influences their recognition of Creole as a legitimate way of speaking, and recommends key characteristics considered necessary for effecting changes in practice. In its analysis of this impact, the paper pays particular attention to the introduction of a dramatic play into the content and delivery of the programme. It attempts an assessment of the dramatisation as a sublime experience for the students in the University of Guyana programme, suggesting the extent to which it was able to effect change in their consciousness and their awareness of the importance of enlightened attitudes to first language recognition in their professional practice.*

### **1. Introduction**

In 2007, the first published research report about early childhood teachers' attitudinal ambivalence to mother tongue use in classroom in Guyana revealed that 70% of the teachers rejected and/or corrected Guyanese children's Creole [1]. The result of this

practice has been negative interaction experiences with children's stimulation and learning outcomes. Overall, teachers reported that children seemed embarrassed, hurt, confused, humiliated, withdrawn, rejected and rendered silent by their critiques. One teacher shares her observations about rejecting and correcting children's home language: 'They [children] may pause and appear as though they don't understand what was just said. They will just left stood-up looking at you'. Another reported: 'Children feel amazed, hurt and confuse[d], and if they are answering a question and are corrected during this time, they do not continue ....'

Two significant contributors to teachers' attitude towards Guyanese Creole English (GCE) are: (i) the historical development of this language and (ii) the curricula offered at the teacher-training institutions.

First, the historical evolution of the language is an organic factor in contemporary attitudes towards it. GCE is one of many English-based Creoles to have developed in the Caribbean. It originated in the institution of slavery and was further entrenched during post-emancipation periods of Indentureship. It evolved with the creolisation of English, in the first place, among speakers of different African languages who superimposed elements of syntax, lexicon and phonology from those languages upon their use of English to form Creole which became their mother tongue. The language was adopted by the indentured East Indians who also contributed linguistically and culturally to its further development. It was a common language shared by Europeans, Africans and Indians, and through the colonial period it became the first language of the majority of the population (descendants of slaves and coolies), even as Standard English was the official language – the most prestigious dialect, the language of government, education, 'culture' and power. The continued co-existence of Standard English and GCE caused movements from creolisation to the development of decreolisation, giving rise to varieties in local speech from dialects of and close to Standard English through varying degrees to dialects of and close to the purest forms of GCE. This was accompanied by a hierarchy of language and class in which speakers of English are regarded as the elite of society, the middle class and

the educated, while speakers of Creole are rather looked-down-upon as the under-class and the unprivileged in the society.

With its development during the era of slavery, and consequential class-based attitudes regarding its use in contemporary times, Creole is generally viewed in Guyana as a reflection of mental inferiority. It is regarded, at best, as an imperfectly developed language, given that the lexicon was borrowed from the enslavers and combined with grammatical structure of the African languages. Most often it is not acknowledged as a language at all, but as a dialect and as a corruption of Standard English. Moreover, particularly in the context of the classroom and language teaching, most teachers cannot differentiate between Creole usage and errors in English grammar. This problem is principally due to the fact that approximation to the orthography of Standard English is very close. For example, in the statements, *Teacha, meh yam-out all meh food* (Teacher, I ate all my food), there are no significant differences in phonology (*teacha* for *teacher* or *meh* for *me/I*), but the use of *yam-out* for *eat* is a lexical feature foreign to English. This therefore suggests that Creole is quite different from English, yet on some occasions it includes many features similar to English and other times it comprises significantly different features altogether.

This may be exemplified by the following sentence, which complicates the *apparent* lexical similarities and confuses the speaker of English. *The dog went on the bridge an meh friken am* (The dog was in the gate-way and I was afraid of it). In English, “went” is the past tense of the verb “to go”, but in this Creole sentence it means the past tense of the verb “to be”. The dog did not move or walk onto the bridge, it was there. “Bridge” in Guyanese English can refer to a gate-way because in Guyana there is likely to be a trench that runs along the side of each roadway, causing a bridge to be built over it to gain access to one’s yard. If we accept the closeness of “friken” to “frighten”, what does “*meh friken am*” mean? “I frightened it”? But the Creole syntax is different. So “*meh friken*” translates into “I was afraid”, eliminating both the “was” and the “-ed” (found in “frighten-ed”) of Standard English. That simple sentence therefore demonstrates several differences. What is largely misconceived as an “absence of grammar” in GCE, or a mispronunciation of the English words, really shows differences in syntax, lexicon and grammar. The Creole is not as inflected a language as English, and has different markers for tense, number and gender (“am” can be he, she or it) as is the case in many African languages. Remember, also, that Spanish and French, as is Latin, are far more inflected than English. “Correcting” that Creole sentence might therefore pose problems for the teacher, and might even evoke such nonsense as “*the dog went on to the bridge and I frightened it off*”.

Thus, despite the fact that Creole is systematic, rule-governed and capable of fulfilling all the language needs of Guyanese, being a language which is rarely written or written for only limited, comic or ephemeral purposes, it is popularly believed to be inferior and clumsy. Yet the characteristics that may lead to those misconceptions are the normal qualities of an oral and non-standard language, which functions efficiently as the first language of most of the population. Most of the real problems of writing Creole lie in the orthography, because of the non-standard nature of the language and the phonological differences between it and Standard English. We have learnt and become accustomed to English orthography, but have never been made to learn an effective way of writing GCE. Irrespective of this, Creole remains alive and different varieties are being spoken throughout Guyana. And, to traverse different language landscapes, the art of code-switching between Creole and Standard English is a skill mastered by many.

Even though Guyanese generally recognise that two language codes exist within their language system, the second major contributor to teachers’ negative attitude towards GCE was attributed to curricula offered at the teacher-training institutions, as observed below by one of the recommendations given in a compulsory module entitled *Nature of Language* [2]:

*Our students’ speech patterns [...] are greatly affected by Creole interference [...]. Remember [...] our task as teachers is to all times try to achieve the Standard English by [...] correcting the speech patterns of the students.* (p. 115)

Given that one of the most significant aspects of children’s early schooling experience is the ability to speak in the classroom, and their home language is often considered the best medium through which it can be done [1], the University of Guyana (UG) made a deliberate attempt to advance knowledge of this principle when the first Early Childhood Professional Development (ECPD) training programme was introduced in 2010. One course (Social Development of the Young Child) covered the development of effective and culturally relevant teacher-child interaction practices. Knowledge about respecting children’s first language was specifically targeted in the module entitled: *Catering for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children*.

## 2. Brief module description

The module, *Catering for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children*, introduces practitioners to the relationship between language and culture and the way these are expressed (see, for example, the uses of “bridge” in Guyanese English, which has a cultural peculiarity). It highlights their role as Early Childhood

Development (ECD) practitioners in the promotion of language experiences, with specific focus on how children learn language and develop identity, self-image and their attitudes to the image of others. Emphasis is placed on the acquisition of language during the early years and the implications of developing impressions of the social and cultural images during this period. The main aim is to bring awareness of the images and impressions being passed on to young children so that they do not contribute to warping, perverting, stereotyping and misconceptions in the minds of the children.

Designed and delivered by the second author, this module promotes the main epistemological standpoint supporting the development of the University of Guyana two-year ECD Certificate programme – effective pedagogical training prescribes ways of interacting with children in the context of practitioners’ own practice [3]. In keeping with the general course delivery, the module offered practice in critical reflection and engaged practitioners in stimulation activities. Notably, the module prescribed specific interaction strategies that should *not* [our emphasis] be used and, by extension, promoted skills in how to interact directly and explicitly with Creole speaking children.

### 3. Preliminary performance outcome

Feedback from the participants of the University of Guyana ECPD training programme suggests that the module reshaped their attitude and approach to the use of Creole in the classroom. The dramatic component of the module, *The Trouble with Neketa*, was reported to have particularly influenced changing interaction practices. *The Trouble with Neketa*, a dramatic dialogue, produced and directed by the second author, highlights identity, self image, culture, and stereotyped views amongst Neketa (a child)’s teachers, her mother and a family friend, in their attempt to eradicate Neketa’s use of GCE.

Three years after programme participation, the ECD practitioners continue to implement strategies associated with this dramatic piece. This research paper shares the findings about these ECD practitioners’ post training Creole interaction experiences during children’s stimulation and learning activities.

### 4. Research question and approach

The question addressed by this report is: ‘What impact has the University of Guyana ECPD programme made on ECD practitioners’ interaction experiences with Guyanese Creole speaking children? To date, reports on this issue in Guyana have identified the problematic nature of classroom interaction (see, for example, Wilkinson [4]; Matthias [5]); however, none has explored how training in the

area of ECD contributes to changing practice in actual classroom contexts, such as, direct observations of post-training everyday exchanges. Therefore, this research, set within the qualitative case study paradigm, was appropriate for capturing these everyday naturalistic-type data [6]. The selection of the cases is based on post-programme observations of the practitioners (n = 34) who graduated from the training programme between 2012 and 2014. Observation, video-review and semi-structured interviews positioned the interactions of the two practitioners presented in this report within two levels of Creole interaction experiences. The first, Ms Caesar, is the only practitioner who fully permitted the use of, and predominantly spoke in Creole in the classroom prior to training. Post-training records show that she now engages children in both Creole and English - the official language of Guyana. Prior to training, the second, Ms Dass, rejected Creole but, after training, adopted a Creole immersion approach. Names of children and ECD practitioners are pseudonyms.

### 5. Interplay of course elements

This section discusses how various attributes of the course worked in an integrated fashion to foster changes in practitioners’ interaction skills of engaging in Creole conversations. The arguments surround the main tenets of the course that, (i) the content satisfactorily offered specific coverage to advance knowledge about how to interact with Creole speaking children. And, (ii) the critical reflection and practice-based element would have had long-lasting effects on ECD practitioners’ skills to perform linguistically and culturally relevant interaction practice.

To examine whether these attributes of the course might be sufficient to bring about positive changes in practice and attitude, two classroom interaction episodes (entitled, *Lunch-time discourse* and *Picture recognition discourse*) have been selected to give accounts of what changes in practice look like, and why the ECD practitioners associate these practices with participation in the UG ECPD programme.

Although this study focuses on ECD, the effects of attitudes to language in the development of the young child (birth to 8 age group), it may be useful to refer to the experiences of a secondary school teacher on similar situations as Ms. Caesar and Ms. Dass. Ms. Matthias is a secondary school teacher who has benefitted from the Bachelor’s level language and linguistics training at the University of Guyana, has therefore received higher level training and would have greater sensitivity to the language issues being analysed in this paper than the students in the UG ECPD Certificate programme under review.

Ms. Matthias reports that she became aware that some of her students struggled to answer questions

and express themselves in class because of lack of fluency in Standard English and the belief that Creole was banned from the classroom. She developed a strategy of prompting them when they struggled, in GCE, and asking them leading questions in that language. She never “corrected” them when they code switched or used GCE in class. It was a delicate exercise because she was ever cognizant that her task was to improve their expression in Standard English. Equally delicate was her task not to suppress their use of Creole as that might shut them up forever in class. (See, Section 6 below, the plight of the little girl in *The Trouble with Neketa*). According to her report, they were often able to make correct responses in GCE. Sometimes she would say to them, “Now tell me that in English”. This gave even the shy ones greater confidence in self-expression and, very importantly, greater confidence in her as their teacher. There was not only a willingness to speak in class, but a bonding, as they would say “Miss, we didn’t know you could speak Creole!” [5].

The experience of Ms. Matthias was with teenagers, while our focus here is on linguistic and cultural awareness in the young child (birth to age 8). Certain damage had already been done to the students who had reached their teens which remedial strategies had to be devised to address. One may note the value of sensitivity to the issue on the part of Early Childhood practitioners to forestall the damage, especially since children’s learning of a language is heavily influenced by age eight [7].

### 5.1. Lunch-time discourse

The video-recorded activity illustrated below took place during the Lunch Session. At this early childhood centre, children bring packed lunches which are stored on a rack and distributed by the ECD practitioners at the beginning of the session. Creole is the predominant language of this group of four-year-olds. Working in this predominately Creole speaking community, Ms Caesar has to balance the advice given by her practicum tutor (the need for children to speak in English), and that of the module on language acceptance.

Ms Caesar: [Holds up a lunch bag] Somebody got a new bag.  
 Coby: [Stands and exclaims] Yeah! I mammy buy am.  
 Ms Caesar: I mammy buy am? My mommy bought it. [Rubs Coby on the head and speaks in a playful and suggesting tone] My mommy bought it.  
 Coby: [Giggles] My mammy bought it.  
 Ms Caesar: Yes, my mommy bought it.  
 Candy: [Next to receive lunch bag] Meh buy dis bag yestada a makit.

*(Yesterday, I bought this bag at the market.)*

Ms Caesar: You bought your bag yesterday?  
 Candy: Eh, eh *(yes)*.  
 Ms Caesar: And who took you to the market?  
 Candy: Meh buy am a makit. *(I bought it at the market.)*  
 Ms Caesar: You? No one took you to the market.  
 Candy: Meh momma. *(My mother)*  
 Ms Caesar: Ok, that’s nice. [Turns to another children] You could take out your snacks.  
 Candy: [Continues to talk as Ms Caesar attends to the other children. She gets up from her seat and walks over to the researcher who is sitting at the back of the class. She touches the researcher and speaks in a high tone] A rat bin want bite meh and meh momma kill am. *(A rat was about to bite me, but my mother killed it.)*  
 Ms Caesar: [On hearing parts of Candy’s comments] Wow, your mother saved you. Did it get away?  
 Candy: Na, sh teck wan... [words unrecognisable] and nack am and shy am... [words unrecognisable]. *(No, she took a... and knocked it, and pelted it...)*  
 Ms Caesar: Oh my, she shy [pelted] the rat too?  
 Candy: Oh no, it must be dead.  
 Ms Caesar: [Giggles] Eh, eh *(yes)*.  
 The discussions about this extract unravelled a number of changes in practice. Ms Caesar related that making commentary about the children’s new lunch bags was a strategy she had adopted to engage the children in conversation in addition to the occasions when she purposefully set out to teach specific concepts and introduce content. She was of the opinion that prior to programme participation, she might have prevented them from talking so much at lunch time, ‘Uh, I might have said, “It’s time for snack now, no talking”’. Ms Caesar credited this specific change about talking more with children during activities to her tutor. Throughout the interviews with Ms Caesar, high credit was given to her tutor for the changes observed in her practice. As a matter of fact, she was of the opinion that almost all the effective strategies observed, were direct results of her tutor’s interventions, recommendations and illustrations. The first author was therefore taken aback when she claimed that the Creole discourse between her and the first child (Coby), in the above episode, was a strategy promoted by her tutor.  
 Researcher: How about the way you interacted with Coby? ... I was wondering whether you could have asked him

- if he thanked his mommy for buying him the bag.
- Ms Caesar: [Pauses for about 5 seconds] Um, not really. No, I did not think about that.
- Researcher: Uh, you corrected his Creole; do you think that's a reason why his conversation about his bag ended prematurely?
- Ms Caesar: But my tutor encouraged me to correct their Creole in a 'kind way'....

It should be noted that Ms Caesar's tutor (Ms Clay) was one of the most effective at offering quality supervision. On this basis, it appeared out of character for her to advise her trainee to restrict the use of the children's first language. To corroborate the ECD practitioner's story, during the interview with Ms Clay, a question was asked about the Creole restriction recommendation. Her response suggests she did encourage Ms Caesar to place restriction on the use of Creole.

*Well, the [children's] language needs some work.... You know, because they are from the country [rural area] doesn't mean they must only talk in Creole... it was appalling.... I grew up in the country, but I never heard it spoken like this, it was the worst kind of Creole I've ever heard; so I told her she must start teaching these children English*

Given that this tutor did not give her trainee specific strategies about teaching English as a second or an additional language, from a socio-linguistic standpoint, the advice given might appear incomplete. The first author's professional experiences of working with young Guyanese children over the past 26 years reveal that direct and suggestive correction such as the strategy used with Coby (*I mammy buy am?*), often restricts extended conversations. Reference can be made again, here, to the plight of the child in *The Trouble with Neketa*, presented in Section 6 below [8]. Also, others have established elsewhere how this practice negatively impacts on children's learning and language development (see, Callender [9]). Paradoxically, considering that English is the official language of Guyana and the language of instruction in formal school, the recommendation of this tutor is understandable. Therefore, instead of allowing children to converse only in Creole (as she did before training), Ms Caesar now attempts to introduce English structures. In introducing English structure during conversations, Ms Caesar did restrict Creole interactions on some occasions; but, as the episode shows, she allowed Creole usage on other occasions or when spoken by particular children. In relation to the example above, her justification for allowing Candy to speak in Creole without correction is as follows:

*You see, she is new. That was her first week at school; we learnt that we should allow them to speak in the Creole language then gradually teach the English.*

Investigation into these variations in practice reveals that Ms Caesar is not only performing strategies recommended or modelled by her tutor but she is also incorporating strategies learnt from taught courses. She makes specific reference to the module on *Working with Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children*. Overall, Ms Caesar has demonstrated how the interplay of feedback from tutor, taught components and reflective practice produced changes in interaction experiences.

## 5.2. Picture recognition discourse

Unlike Ms Caesar, Ms Dass, the second practitioner took a different approach to Creole usage in her classroom. Considering her interaction with children as an improvement on past practice, Ms Dass no longer corrects or rejects children's Creole; she adopted a Creole immersion approach. This observation is evident for episodes such as the following:

- Ms Dass: Today we will be colouring...  
Everybody has a picture to colour?
- Children: Yeah!
- Ms Dass: [Displays a sample of the picture on the worksheet] Who could tell me what this is? [...]
- Dave: Ice cream. [In my opinion this black and white picture looks like a cone]
- Ms Dass: This is a shell; a sea shell.
- Children: A sea shell.
- Ms Dass: And where do we find them?
- Children: Wata side! (*seashore*)
- Ms Dass: Yes, very good, [displays another picture] who could tell me what this is?
- Dave: Meh na know (*I don't know*).
- Ms Dass: You don't know? Man, this is ....  
[...]
- Dyal: [Observes Danny submitting worksheet] I na (*I'm not*) finish[ed] yet teacher.
- Ms Dass: [Turns to Dyal] Don't worry, I'll wait for you. Take your time, I'll wait for you....

Throughout the period of the observations, interaction experiences between Ms Dass and children were rich and engaging and no effort was made to reject or correct children's Creole language. In the same vein, it should be noted that no effort was made to teach English Language, the official language of Guyana. Therefore, one factor considered relevant for explaining differences in interaction practices is the variation in the implementation of the strategies

advocated by the course. Ms Dass seemed to have participated less in the critical review processes to help her think about and explore the implication of language promotion.

By firmly following the content on home language in the classroom, Ms Dass took a potentially damaging approach to Creole usage. She claims that she no longer ‘corrects’ children’s use of Creole because she had learned it was not good practice. She notes, ‘Before training, I used to correct their Creole all the time, but now I allow them.... When we considered the play (*The Trouble with Neketa*), we realised how insulting it was to correct children’s Creole....’ Since the module on first language awareness was conducted mainly through the use of drama and role play, Ms Dass seems to have remembered the recommendations about language acceptance at the expense of those offered in theory-based components which offer advice to practitioners on ways to introduce English. Consequently, due to Ms Dass’ uncritical and non-reflective approach to some of the course content, the probability of the children learning to speak in English was reduced.

That said, it remained evident that the dramatic production has contributed to a shift in the pedagogical practice of ECD practitioners in Guyana. Standard English is no longer taught as an ‘absolute’ language to the exclusion (and possible detriment) of GCE.

It is here that the main argument of the play lies, not in the strategies necessary for the teaching of Standard English. It rather shows strategies that should not be used. We refer again to two tasks facing the ECD practitioner – the sound and sensitive practice of language acceptance on the one hand, and the duty to introduce and teach English on the other. What is dramatized are the failure to teach English on the part of Neketa’s teachers, the active suppression of the child’s first language/mother tongue, and the dangers arising from both.

## 6. The Trouble With Neketa

This short play interrogates the issues that lead to these dangers. It treats a range of factors including the linguistic, psychological, sociolinguistic and social, that all have a role in the language development of the young child. It exposed the ECD practitioners to ways of engaging with *linguistically and culturally diverse children*. It was performed by the National Drama Company – the professional arm of the National School of theatre Arts and Drama as a demonstration for the class at the University of Guyana, having been built in as a part of the module by the second author. Roughly, the plot follows attempts by her mother, a family friend, and teachers to eradicate the Creole speech of a young child and get her to speak English instead. In the process they run into various problems

associated with the language, cultural, social and psychological development of the young child.

### 6.1. The dramatic sketch

*Laverne, a lecturer at the university; receives a visit from her friend Salima.*

Salima: Hi Laverne, Good afternoon.

Laverne: Good afternoon, Salima. You say you have a problem.

Salima: Yes, I wonder if you can help.

Laverne: What’s the matter?

Salima: Well is not really me, who have the problem; is Nicole.

Laverne: Oh, Nicole, what happened to her?

Salima: Nothing’s wrong with her, it’s her daughter. I told her I would come to you for help.

Laverne: OK, tell me.

Salima: Well, where shall I start? ... Nicole and her good friend Nareema had a falling out over Nicole’s daughter.

Laverne: Really? So how can I help there?

Salima: Nicole is worried. She’s worried that her daughter can’t talk.

Laverne: Can’t talk? What you mean?

Salima: She can’t talk.

Laverne: How old is the child?

Salima: Three years. It is embarrassing.

Laverne: Three years and can’t talk? What do you mean? Is she dumb?

Salima: No, she’s not dumb; no, no – she talking.

Laverne: But you said she can’t talk.

Salima: Yes, she’s talking; but she can’t talk good.

Laverne: Three years. Well you know there might not be any real problem. It is true, at three most children are talking, but some children are late developers. Nicole’s daughter might be quite normal, but affected by something. There are many things that would cause a young child to take some time learning to speak properly.

Salima: Properly! You just use the right word. At first, nothing was wrong with her. She is not one of those slow developers or retarded ones at all. She started talking quite alright; in fact she start so early, and was talking so much, we thought she was bright. But then, oh my goodness, this child started talking badly.

Laverne: You’re confusing me.

Salima: I went to look for Nicole and saw the child. I said to her: “Good afternoon Neketa. Call mommy for me”. She answer: “me mooma na deh home” (*my mother is not at home*). So I say: who is inside? She answer: “only me granny wan, deh in deh” (*only my grandmother is inside*).

Laverne: Oh, that's what you mean. That's what you mean by "properly".

Salima: Duh! Of course. Didn't I tell you she can't talk good? You're a big lecturer and you don't know that?

Laverne: I now see what you mean.

Salima: Girl, sometimes I take her aside and try to teach her. She can't even say "good morning" – here's what she says: "maanin!" (*good morning*). Whenever her mother brings her to see me, she cannot even say "good bye", all she saying is "Aunt Lima (she can't say Salima) Aunt Lima, ah gaa-in" (*Aunt Salima I am leaving*).

Laverne: Salima, I understand you now. But the girl is normal. Nothing's wrong with her.

Salima: Normal, you say? The problem now is worse than that. It was bad enough when she used to talk plenty, but now she's hardly talking. She doesn't say much at all, like you have to force her to talk.

Laverne: Oh? She's not talking now?

Salima: Nicole used to be very embarrassed when the child used to prattle off with her bad language. But now we are worried that she's hardly saying anything.

Laverne: Look, you better take me to see Nicole; let me talk to her.

Salima: Oh no; Nicole is right outside here.

Laverne: What? So why didn't she come in?

Salima: [Laughs] She's kind of shy. She's a bit embarrassed, and she is not accustomed to university people.

Laverne: Bring her in.

Laverne: Hi, Nicole. I understand that you have two problems. First you say your daughter cannot speak properly.

Nicole: Yes.

Laverne: Then you say she has now stopped talking.

Nicole: Yes.

Laverne: Does she go to school?

Nicole: Yes.

Laverne: Which school do you send her to?

Nicole: Nareema's Play School. But me neva satisfy (*But I wasn't satisfied*).

Laverne: What do you mean?

Nicole: From de time she staat talk, she a talk baad, baad. No care how me try, she can't talk prappa. Me did believe now she a go a school she woulda larn fe talk, but everyday she come back home a talk same way. So me tek she out fram Nareema School an sen she to Princess Nursery School. (*From the time she started talking she spoke badly no matter how I tried to teach her to speak properly. I thought sending her to school will improve her speech, but every day she came home she*

*spoke the same. Therefore, I moved her from Nareema's school to Princess Nursery School*).

Laverne: I think I understand the first problem. But I'm really now interested in the second.

Nicole: ... Princess Nursery School bettah, so me sen she go deh. But afta a while me notice Neketa get quiet, quiet. (*I sent her to Princess Nursery School because it is better, but after a while I noticed that she got quiet*). She would hardly talk.

Salima: But Nicole, suppose it's the new school; she's not used to it, and maybe she misses the old school and her old friends.

Nicole: Is true yu know. . . Teacha Melanie complain to me that something wrang to she – she nah talk an like she too shy, she try keep way fram the other pickney dem an so. (*It could be true, Teacher Melanie complained that something is wrong with her because she is not talking and appears shy. She does not socialise with the other children*).

Laverne: OK now, I really want to find out more about this second problem, Nicole. Here's what we will do – we will visit both Nareema's and Melanie's school.

[...]

*On the premises of Nareema's Playschool. Children shouting, crying, complaining... confusion....*

*The noise angers her. She rushes to the door shouting to the children inside.*

Nareema: Hear! Hear! All-yu shut a-yu mouth an go sleep! Me tell yu if yu no stap a-yu noise me go come een deh an cut a-yu tail. Lil Bhai, whey yu a watch me fah? Get back deh, lie dung sleep. (*Everyone, stop talking and go to sleep. I'm telling you, if you do not stop your noise I'll come in and whip you. Little boy, why are you staring at me? Go back, lie down and sleep*).

[Enter Salima and Laverne. Nareema greets them.]

Salima: Hi Teacher Nareema, how are you, girl?

Nareema: Wha me fe tell yu, gyal? Me good. (*What should I tell you girl? I'm good*).

Salima: Look Nareema, this is Dr Laverne Semple-McBean from UG. She is the expert in Early Childhood Education I told you about.

Laverne: Good afternoon, Nareema. I just want to ask something about a child, Neketa – you do remember Neketa, don't you?

Nareema: Yes, me does. (*Yes, I do*)

Laverne: Did you notice anything about her? Did she have any problems?

Nareema: None at all taal. Is she mooma that is de problem... say me not learnin de chile to speak English. We does speak proper

Hinglish in this school. *(Not at all. Its's her mother who has the problem... said I'm not teaching her child to speak English. We do speak proper English in this school).*

Laverne: What do you teach them?

Nareema: Is not me fault the chile does talk bad... *(It's not my fault that the child speaks badly).*

Laverne: OK, Nareema, me no gat nutten else fe aks yu *(I do not have any other question to ask).* You've been very helpful. Thank you.

[As they leave] It's time to talk with Teacher Melanie now.

[Salima and Laverne arrives at Princess Nursery School. *It is posh, elaborate and excessive. The sounds of the children are heard. Refined, pseudo-cultured, unnaturally and satirically proper.*

Melanie: It is so kind of you to visit us at Princess Nursery School. I feel honoured, Dr Semple-McBean.

Salima: Ah-hem. Hmmm. We just need to ask about a child with a problem. As we advised you, we are enquiring about little Neketa.

Melanie: Oh yes, Neketa. Neketa has a learning problem.

Laverne: Learning problem? What is it?

Melanie: As you see here, we have quality students here at Princess. Our standards are very high, and we did make an effort to teach Neketa to speak properly. You see, I believe her mother seems to be from what they call the ghetto. You can tell by the way she speaks. Her daughter is naturally the same. Lacking in intelligence and good culture.

Laverne: She was unintelligent and uncultured?

Melanie: Yes - all broken English and bad grammar. We always corrected Neketa. You see, we have good quality children here. Many parents are lawyers; one is a minister of government; two are Opposition MP's; two foreigners and an engineer. So I took pains to always correct Neketa.

Laverne: How did you do that?

Melanie: I had to tell her everytime she spoke, to speak properly. I took no chance; I stopped her everytime she said something wrong. Then she had a habit after school to be shouting, making jokes with the other children, loudly right in front of the yard. I couldn't have other parents hearing her in that broken, low class language. They might take their children out of the school. Plus, it was the things she talked about.

Laverne: Oh? Tell me.

Melanie: [To Salima] You should know about this, low class *(local)* food – shined rice, dhol and rice, dhol puri, salted fish, bakes and so on.

Laverne: OK. And is it better now?

Melanie: Well I hope so. She has stopped. Besides, very often some of the better children used to laugh at her when she spoke. They teased her. But she is not improving; she does not seem to know or learn anything. She hardly talks any more.

Laverne : You know, Teacher Melanie, one day when I have some time, I would wish to talk seriously with you. But for now, thank you very much.

Melanie: You're very welcome. Nice of you to drop by.

Laverne: You know, Salima. I need to have a talk with Nicole, too. I think I am understanding Neketa's problem much better now.

## 6.2. Commentary

With regards to the early childhood practitioners who participated in the training programme, they were required to reflect on what was learnt about language, language learning, varieties of English, use of language and social class, cultural factors, and address the following with reasons, details and illustrations:

1. What varieties of English are spoken by each of the characters? Which of them perform code switching? Can you say where and why they switch codes?
2. Explain Teacher Nareema's use of language.
3. What errors, misconceptions about language are expressed by Salima, Nicole and Melanie?
4. Why does Laverne say she would like a serious talk with Teacher Melanie? What advice do you think she will give her?
5. Do you think Laverne has figured out the problems? Do you know what they are? Explain Neketa's problem.
6. What solutions will Laverne suggest to Nicole?
7. Do you have any advice for Teacher Nareema?

The discussions emanating from these questions suggest increased awareness of the place of Creole in education. It became evident that while Neketa is the central character as highlighted by the title of the dramatic production "The Trouble with Neketa", this title is somewhat ironic - the trouble surrounds the adults providing care and early stimulation language experiences for Neketa. To continue the irony, it is to



be further noted that the ‘title character’ – the character of central focus never appears in the play. Apart from being a dramatic technique, it emphasises the irony and makes a telling teaching point. Laverne is able to discover Neketa’s “problem” without ever meeting her. She was able to do this by an examination of the adults around her, demonstrating the important role of the adults in shaping (or marring) the child’s linguistic experience.

As indicated in the Introduction section of this paper, the art of code-switching seems to be a skill mastered by some Guyanese as they alternate between the two languages. The dramatic dialogue highlights how this is done based on the audience spoken to. The character Nareema, after being reminded by her friend Salima about the professional standing of Lavern, attempted to use more English-based language in her responses to Lavern. Unfortunately, given that Nareema does not yet have the proficiency to fully speak in Standard English, her attempt resulted in hyper-correction:

Laverne: Good afternoon, Nareema. I just want to ask something about a child, Neketa – you do remember Neketa, don’t you?

Nareema: Yes, me does (*Yes, I do*).

An acceptable answer from Nareema, in Creole, could have been, ‘Yes, me na mus remember dah picknie (*Yes, how could I forget that child?*)’. On the other hand, as illustrated below, Lavern has the proficiency to speak in Creole and Standard English, and therefore, could be classified as bilingual.

Laverne: OK, Nareema, me no gat nutten else fe aks yu (*I do not have any other question to ask*). You’ve been very helpful. Thank you.

Throughout the dramatic dialogue, it is evident that conversations result in the production of two varieties of Creole – one with friends, family and close associates, and another with professionals and strangers. In most cases, some Standard English structures and vocabulary is used when speaking to professionals and strangers; but when speaking with friends many Guyanese speak Creole almost exclusively. Notwithstanding, it is common to find Guyanese rejecting their mother tongue in preference for the perceived ‘prestigious’ variety - English - especially as it is seen as a way to attain prestigious and high social status.

These are very important to the social and sociolinguistic factors treated in the play. One of its aims was to build awareness in the class of the co-existence in the same group of linguistic and culturally diverse children whose language, socialisation and rights they have to recognise and honour. We recall Ms Dass saying the play taught her how insulting it is not to do this. Teacher Melanie in the dramatisation insults Neketa and her mother because they speak GCE and are “(obviously) from the ghetto”.

Aspects of the history of Creole in Guyana have been outlined. There is a hierarchy of language and social class that runs fairly parallel to the Creole continuum. It has already been explained that many Guyanese are bilingual – proficient in the use of both Standard English and CGE and can command language varieties right across the continuum. This group includes the educated and the middle class (Laverne, for instance). At the same time there is a cultural continuum from the middle class culture of the elite to the “ghetto” culture of the working class or the ‘rustic’ culture of the folk. This has given rise to stereotypes and class snobbery. There is widespread socialisation and a belief that the culture of the elite is “better” or “superior”, and even members of the folk and the proletariat will subscribe to this (Nicole, for example). Attempts were made in the UG ECPD class and in the play to disabuse the students of this view and to sensitise them on how to engage with children from the less privileged classes on an equal level with the children of the elite. The play in a rather subtle way partly addressed ethnic variations as well.

## 7. Discussion

Unlike the 2007 study which showed that Guyanese teachers used offensive comments to prevent children from using Creole [1], participants in the UG ECPD show some degree of sensitivity and thought about their approach and attitude to children’s use of Creole. The findings from this study have established how the interplay of feedback from tutor, taught components and reflective practice could produce changes in the pedagogical practices of ECD practitioners working in Creole speaking environments. The findings show that ‘change is most likely when practitioners are confronted by their own and others’ practice, and when [...] the theories or the beliefs they espouse is challenged by their actions in the context of their practice’ [3] (p. 127).

As a result, the tensions that exist over the place of Creole in the classroom is beginning to reduce. Practitioners recognise the centrality of Creole, question the opinions that ‘real learning’ takes place in Standard English and translate their new learning into a workable pedagogy. In the main, their expressions about the use of Creole fall into three areas:

1. The links between Creole and culture (e.g. the language of the home, folk history, poetry and literature);
2. Use of standard English in formal contexts (e.g. classroom based work, speaking etc);
3. Responsibility for the development of Standard English and its relationship to future aspirations.

The notable differences in the performance of the two cases reported in this research paper could be

attributed to variation in the implementation of the strategies recommended by the course. Ms Dass immediately implemented strategies learnt from the module, *Working with Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children*. As indicated in the introduction of the article, this module specifically featured dramatic presentations to promote awareness of the images and impressions passed on to the children that contribute to the negative stereotyping of Creole. At the time of this study Ms Dass had not yet implemented aspects from content-based component on 'good' language development practices. This suggests that the content might not have been sufficiently explicit or practical to trigger easy implementation. Her vivid descriptions about the delivery of the module, *Working with Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children* echoes the famous Chinese philosophy, 'I hear [read] and I forget; I see [observe] and I remember; I do [practise] and I understand. Ms Dass did not remember much of the established theoretical and sociolinguistic principles given by the facilitator of the module but, from the experience of the dramatic presentation, she seems to have understood its benefits in the classroom context: 'When we considered the play, we realised how insulting it was to correct children's Creole....'

The observations of Ms Dass' practices raises questions about effective course delivery; specifically, about 'practice-based' element as an important and necessary component of training. However, the overall findings suggest that this practitioner might need to participate in critical review to help her think about and explore her everyday classroom language experiences. Ms Caesar, the practitioner who engaged in constant practice, reflection on, and adaption of course materials demonstrated more conscious and engaging Creole and English dialogues. This practitioner performed interaction with initiative, adaptability and reflectivity. It might therefore be reasonable to conclude that Ms Caesar's interaction practice fits the profile of 'effective teaching and learning', described by Hattie [10] in his meta-analysis of over 800 studies:

*[T]eachers having a mind frame in which they see it as their role to evaluate their effect on learning [... and this] requires dedicated and passionate people (pp. 15-16).*

Regardless of the level at which the two ECD practitioners in the study performed, they both showed signs of passion and dedication in the implementation of new approaches to the use of Creole in the classrooms. The distinction in practitioners' performance was principally marked by their ability to 'evaluate' effectiveness of the new approaches and 'act' accordingly.

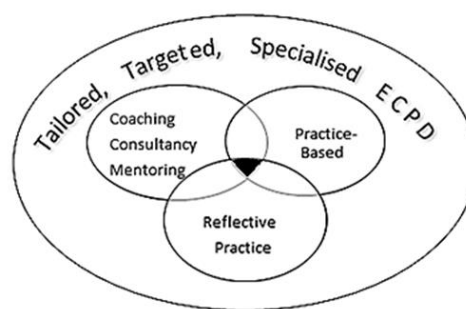


Figure 1. Model of effective ECPD

Following the discussion on the practices of Ms Dass and Ms Caesar, it is reasonable to suggest that critical reflection and practice-focused activities are necessary features of effective ECPD training programme. The shaded area in the Model above suggests where ECD practitioners should be positioned if training is to have effective outcomes on their practice. More importantly, this study has shown that when training and developmental materials and approaches are culturally relevant, target specific needs or are content-specific, outcomes might be favourable.

The incorporation of reflective-practice-focused activities, through dramatic presentations for example, encourages 'knowledge transfer, translation, and reflection to [...] deepen understanding of the theories-in-use and, thus, improve the intentionality of the [ECD practitioners'] actions' [11] (p. 163). The key features identified in the Model above have been endorsed by one of the latest systematic reviews of professional development [12]. Eurofound (2015) released evidence from 28 EU Member States in support of the Model above [12].

Whilst the above characteristics of ECPD are considered necessary for positive outcome in pedagogical practice, similar training initiatives have shown that trainees' readiness to change could significantly influence training outcomes [13]. In the USA, Paterson [13] determined 'readiness' by teachers' levels of motivation, values, beliefs, and self-efficacy. In New Zealand, Whitehead [14] highlighted characteristics such as attendance at class, time management and attention to course readings. In both studies, the researchers point out that trainee who show willingness to comply with suggestions and openness to receiving new information were more successful in achieving training outcomes.

In light of the findings on teachers' readiness to change, it is possible that even if the key elements of ECPD are incorporated, factors such as ECD practitioners' motivation, values and beliefs could impede training impact. However, taking into account the potential of 'reflective-dramatic-focused' ECPD training, it is reasonable to assume that ECD practitioners who are 'ready to change' and participate

in training programmes that embrace these features, ought to achieve the ultimate goal of ECPD - enhancement of learning and development of children

With regard to the issue of enhancement of learning and development of children, increasing numbers of studies have provided additional evidence to support the link between ECPD and child outcomes [12]. The results of the reported studies on ECPD initiatives introduced and examined by Eurofound (2015), for example, have shown a relation between ECPD that are explicit in nature and positive child outcomes. These studies confirm that explicit and culturally targeted ECPD effect changes in practices irrespective of teachers' background variables, such as, training level and years of experience. Therefore, further studies may be useful in Guyana, to tease out explicitly how ECPD serves as a catalyst for children's learning and development. It is not within the scope of this paper to examine the processes involved in the changes of practitioners' attitude to Creole and children's outcomes. This paper aimed to examine the relationship between, and the outcomes of, professional development on ECD practitioners' Creole interaction experiences during children's stimulation and learning activities. Therefore one limitation of this paper might be the inability to report the pedagogical outcomes of Creole acceptance on children's development and learning. Nevertheless, this paper does suggest that the outcomes for children can be improved when the teachers are exposed to culturally targeted or specialised ECPD.

## 8. Conclusion

To adequately explain the elements responsible for the changes in practice reported in this paper, we have identified the functional elements of training programme. It is our belief that this is necessary, because it is only by examining how attributes of programmes function as mechanisms of change, and how they interact with each other to promote knowledge and skills, can decisions be made about what strategies are most useful or which should be discontinued.

Specific components of the UG ECPD training programme have been identified as positive agents of support and change for practitioners' interaction practice. The important role one tutor played in stimulating thinking about language promotion practice was highlighted. The role of simulation in affecting change to attitude in language acceptance has also been considered. In particular, the dramatic-based element seems to have had long-lasting effects on participant's knowledge of interaction, their skills to engage with children, and their attitude towards the Creole language. The simulation component seems to have encouraged practitioners to think about possible ways of interacting with Creole in their physical early childhood settings.

When practitioners balance and incorporate the different pedagogical strategies promoted by the programme, changes appear to be much more pronounced. This suggests that more desirable outcomes of ECPD might be achieved by amalgamating different approaches to training. Ms Caesar's Creole discourse episode shows how, collectively, course components can result in positive changes. But in situations where (for example, in the case of Ms Dass) changes in practice might deprive children from becoming competent user of English language, further training might be necessary for more positive outcomes. As indicated in the earlier study on practitioners approach to GCE in classrooms [1], ECPD training programme in Guyana should aim to promote:

*The recognition of GCE as a legitimate way of speaking, with English being viewed as a useful linguistic instrument for giving children access to traverse different socio-cultural environment, and not feel limited by their language abilities (p. 248).*

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