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Writing in Creole Contexts: A Study of Jamaican Primary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Creole-speaking contexts are significantly underrepresented in language and literacy research yet present a unique context for understanding the nature of language and literacy development among numerous learners in the Global South. In the Caribbean in particular, the poor writing outcomes of Creole speakers across all levels of education has been a subject of lament for educators and policymakers for several years. Given the significant differences between the home and school languages, particularly in the areas of grammar and phonology, as well as the importance of these skills in writing, it is worth exploring the nature of writing challenges among Creole dominant learners in the Caribbean. This paper outlines an empirical study exploring the nature of writing challenges experienced by Creole dominant primary school learners in the Jamaican context. As part of a larger mixed-methods study, students completed a narrative writing task which was assessed with reference to an analytic rubric. Findings showed that beyond grammar, which has largely been the focus of extant literature, Creole dominant learners experienced significant challenges in lower-order transcription skills and higher-order oral language skills at the word, sentence, and text levels. Findings are discussed in line with the not-so-simple view of writing and recommendations for supporting the literacy development of Creole-speaking learners in the Caribbean are outlined.

Introduction

> "We write a language we do not speak. We speak a language we do not write."
>
> (Mutabaruka as cited in Cooper, 2013, p.3)

Writing plays a critical role in student success across the school years, being the primary medium through which students demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of the curriculum (Murphy, 2018). In addition to being a core competence, writing represents one of the most complex skills to be mastered by the primary school learner given its reliance on the coordination of orthographic, linguistic, and cognitive skills, as well as content knowledge (Genesee et al., 2006). While numerous students tend to struggle in writing globally (MoEY, 2001a; NCES, 2019), second language learners face unique writing challenges as they are tasked with simultaneously developing proficiency in the language of instruction and learning curriculum content (Murphy et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2015). Though more is known about writing development in first language contexts, the literature on second language writing remains limited (Mackenzie et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2015; Woolpert, 2016). However, even more underrepresented in writing research, and literacy development literature more generally, are the numerous learners in the Caribbean and elsewhere with Creoles as their home and/ or dominant language.

Caribbean Creoles, the languages of focus in the present article, constitute a mixture of African languages which largely form the

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grammatical base (i.e., the substrate) and European languages which contribute the bulk of the lexicon (i.e., the lexifier). Consequently, Creole speakers represent a distinctive population in language and literacy research, deemed "neither first nor foreign language learners" of the lexifier language, which, in most cases, represents the language of literacy (Nero & Stevens, 2018, p.18).

In his oft-cited words, popular Jamaican poet, Mutabaruka, succinctly sums up the Jamaican language situation and the resulting literacy plight: "*We write a language we do not speak. We speak a language we do not write*" (Mutabaruka, cited in Cooper, 2013, p.3). This linguistic mismatch, which is characteristic of the wider Caribbean, is a remnant of years of European conquest and colonization, wherein most islands afford official status to a European language, while an oral Creole, generally perceived as low status, is spoken by the masses. Within this context, upon entering school, most Caribbean learners are educated in an official European language (e.g., English, French, Spanish) while the home language (or Creole) is largely disregarded in the classroom. Given the relationship between Creoles and their lexifier languages, which provide the bulk of the language's lexicon and are generally the medium of education, learners tend to have greater receptive knowledge of English (comprehension) than learners more typically deemed as learning English as an additional language (EAL) in the Global North (Clachar, 2005). However, this is not the case with the productive skill of writing. Over the years, writing has been identified as one of the greatest educational challenges facing Caribbean learners (McCourtie, 1998; The Jamaica Education Transformation Commission, 2021). However, despite continued concern over the years, little to no research has addressed the nature of writing challenges experienced by this population in the primary years.

In this article, we focus on the challenges in writing experienced by Creole speakers in the Caribbean when writing in the language(s) of literacy. Prior to presenting an empirical study exploring the writing challenges experienced by primary school learners in Jamaica when writing in Jamaican Standard English, a description of Creole languages is provided as well as an overview of the literature concerning writing outcomes among Creole speakers. We then conclude with recommendations for research and practice in the region.

Caribbean Creoles

Creoles are contact languages that emerge in circumstances where two or more groups who do not share a common language need to communicate (Siegel, 2010). Unlike pidgins, which also find their provenance in contexts of language contact, Creoles, become the native tongue of a people, due to sustained contact between groups across generations, (Salmon & Menjívar, 2017). While Creole languages are spoken in numerous societies across the world with colonial histories, Caribbean Creoles emerged from the harsh realities of the transatlantic slave trade which involved the capture and transport of millions of individuals from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean to work as slaves on plantations across the West Indies (Helms-Park et al., 2016). As contact languages, Creoles consist of a lexifier or superstrate language which provides the bulk of the lexicon as well as a substrate language(s) that largely supplies the phonological and grammatical base of the language (Siegel, 2008, 2010). In the Caribbean context, the lexifier language represents the language of dominance and colonization, that is, English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish, while the substrate languages represent the languages of the conquered—the indigenous languages of West Africa and the Caribbean (i.e., Amerindians).

The Creole Continuum

In his seminal work, DeCamp (1971) first used the term "creole continuum" to describe the nature of the languages spoken in the Caribbean. From this perspective, unlike the more typical binary scenario found in bilingual contexts (e.g., English and French in Canada), language usage in contexts where a Creole exists can be placed on a continuum. There are three anchor points along the continuum with the Creole and the lexifier language representing the end points—with the most conservative form of the Creole being deemed the basilect, the standardized lexifier language as the acrolect, and the middle range varieties characterized by varied mixtures of the Creole and lexifier languages, as the mesolect (DeCamp, 1971). Given this unique mixing of languages, a key feature of Caribbean language usage then is the somewhat blurred lines between the Creole language and the lexifier languages. Using Jamaican Creole as an example, the following adapted example from Hall-Alleyne (1981) highlights the nature of the creole continuum ranging from the basilect (Jamaican Creole) to the acrolect (Standard Jamaican English):

In addition to highlighting the nature of the continuum, Hall-Alleyne's (1981) widely cited example also underlines the complexities of literacy development in Jamaica and the wider anglophone Caribbean, as well as the implications for writing. In the above example, only the final sentence (the acrolect) would be assessed as correct by a teacher, while the other examples representing the basilectal and mesolectal varieties which constitute Jamaican

Creole, would be assessed as incorrect. As Jamaica is the context of focus for the research described in this article, a description of that Creole and its orthography is provided in the next section.

Orthographic Properties of Jamaican Creole

As a British Colony, the Creole spoken in Jamaica is a combination of British English as the lexifier language and a substrate mixture from the Akan, Bantu, Twi, and Kwa language families contributing the grammatical base of the language (Bryan, 2010). With English supplying approximately 90% of the lexicon of Jamaican Creole (Wright-Karem & Washington, 2021), the boundaries between the lexifier and the Creole particularly on the surface level, become somewhat blurred—a factor which has contributed to the Creole being viewed as a broken form of English in need of fixing rather than as a language in its own right. Consistent with this view, Jamaicans, despite their actual proficiency, tend to identify as dominant speakers of Standard Jamaican English (Nero, 2014). Nevertheless, despite deep-seated standard language ideology in the Caribbean affording greater power and prestige to the European lexifier languages, Creoles have long been accepted by linguists as languages in their own right (Labov, 1969; Rickford, 1987).

Like most Caribbean Creoles, there is no officially accepted orthography for Jamaican Creole, though the Cassidy-JLU orthographic system (Jamaica Language Unit, 2009) has been proposed by, and is widely used by linguists. It is worth noting that while Jamaican Creole forms the focus of this study, the language bears significant similarities with other transatlantic English-lexified Creoles spoken across the anglophone Caribbean and West Africa (e.g., West African Pidgin English), particularly in terms of grammar.

Grammar

Grammar, at the level of morphosyntax and sentence structure, is where Jamaican Creole is most clearly distinguished from Standard Jamaican English. In her seminal work on Jamaican Creole instruction, Bailey (1966) offered one of the initial linguistic descriptions of Jamaican Creole grammar and outlined key distinctions between the Creole and Standard Jamaican English. Bryan (2010, pp. 8–9) provides a summary of the key grammatical differences outlined by Bailey (1966) alongside a few additional points highlighted by Alleyne (1989) and Craig (1999), which has been adapted below in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Grammatical Differences between Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English

Jamaican creole grammatical rule	Example
There is no subject-verb concord	*Di bwai dem ron/ Di bwai ron* The boys run/ The boy runs
The tense system uses the unmarked verb as well as a particle indicating "past"	*'Him (ben) iit/ Him (did) iit* He ate/ He has eaten
Creole uses the objectless active verb to indicate the passive voice	"D*i fuud sel aaf"* All the food has been sold
Creole verbs and adjectives predicate without the use of the copula	*Mi sik* I am sick
The use of adjectives as verbs	*Dem mad mi* They upset me
Plural is marked with the particle "dem"	*Do mango dem swiit* The mangoes are sweet

Phonology

Jamaican Creole has a smaller number of phonemes than Standard Jamaican English and fewer phonemic combinations (Bryan, 2010). Some key phonological markers of Caribbean Creoles, and Jamaican Creole more specifically, are consonant cluster simplification, phoneme deletion, and palatalization. Consonant clusters are typically simplified either through epenthesis or phoneme deletion. In instances of epenthesis, an epenthetic schwa (or unstressed vowel) is inserted into consonant clusters containing a nasal consonant. For instance, "Smith" is transformed into /simit/, and "snake" becomes /siniek/ (Bryan, 2010). Conversely, deletion is employed to simplify consonant clusters wherein words such as "last," "strong," and "skin" are pronounced as /laas/, /chrang/, and /kin/, respectively. This deletion of consonants gives rise to numerous semantically unrelated homonyms across Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English. Bryan (2010, p. 10) provides some examples:

English	Jamaican creole
Tin, thin	/tin/
Fine, find	/fain/
Coal, cold	/kuol/

Another feature of Jamaican Creole phonology is the absence of the /r/ phoneme, wherein words such a "tree," "dry," "pastor," and "hour" are pronounced /chii/, /jai/, /paasta/, and /owa/. Cassidy (1971) attributes such deletions and/ or substitutions to the absence of the /r/ in the Twi language. In addition to consonant cluster simplification and deletion, palatalization of velar stops (k and g) is another characteristic feature of Jamaican phonology. A palatal glide [y] is inserted following the velar consonant such that "Canada," "cat," and "gal," become /kyanada/, /kyat/, and /gyal/.

The phonological processes mentioned in this article, though most prolific, are not exhaustive (see Devonish and Harry (2008) for a detailed phonological analysis). Nevertheless, they provide a sense of the differences between the languages as well as some insight into possible spelling challenges for learners more dominant in Jamaican Creole when writing in Standard Jamaican English.

Vocabulary

Approximately 90% of the Jamaican Creole lexicon is derived from British English, making vocabulary the most extensively shared domain between the two languages (Wright-Karem & Washington, 2021). Beyond the British influence on Jamaican Creole's vocabulary, additional contributions came from indigenous groups (e.g., Amerindians), indentured laborers (e.g., Indians) and most notably, from the African languages spoken by slaves (Bryan, 2010; Cassidy, 1971). The lexical items in Table 2 are adopted from Pratt-Johnson's compilation of Jamaican Creole vocabulary items (2006, p. 123).

The extensive overlap in vocabulary between Caribbean Creoles and their lexifier languages pose both challenges and advantages for Creole speakers. For many learners, a significant difficulty arising from the shared vocabulary, is the masking of underlying structural distinctions between the home language and the language of literacy (MoEY, 2001b). Simultaneously, the substantial commonality in vocabulary means that Creole dominant learners typically possess greater receptive knowledge of the target language than learners traditionally classified as learning English as an additional language (EAL), owing to the reduced "learning burden" (Nation, 2013).

TABLE 2
Examples of Jamaican Creole Vocabulary

Jamaican creole	English
Pickney	Child
Mawga	Skinny
Nuff	Plenty
Smady	Someone
Irie	Cool, good, nice
Duppy	Ghost
Facety	Rude
Craven	Greedy
Nyam	To eat
Ginnal	A trickster
Bickle	Food
Sinting	Something

In the light of the unique linguistic relationship between the home language and the language of literacy for Creole speakers in the Caribbean, learners stand to gain from context-sensitive pedagogical approaches that leverage and build on their existing receptive skills while acknowledging the structural and systematic differences between the Creole and lexifier language. Such approaches, however, are generally absent as most islands in the Caribbean adopt a subtractive, or at best, a transitional bilingualism approach, wherein the home language is either completely absent from the classroom or used in the early years to support comprehension of the official language. Indeed, the limited number of studies exploring instructional approaches have generally reported findings showing the ubiquity of ad hoc correction of the Creole in writing without the provision of explanatory feedback (Nero & Stevens, 2018; Tucker, 2023) and a general pedagogical ambivalence on the part of teachers concerning writing instruction for Creole dominant learners (Lewis-Fokum & Thomas, 2018; Tucker, 2023). Considering the significant role of oral language skills in writing for both first (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Harrison et al., 2016) and second language speakers of English (Babayiğit, 2014; Silverman et al., 2015; Woolpert, 2016), and the efficacy of instructional approaches that are responsive to students' linguistic needs and skill levels (Olinghouse, 2008), such contexts present unique and significant challenges for Creole users' literacy development in the "standard" variety used in education.

Student Writing Outcomes in the Caribbean

The poor writing outcomes of students across the Anglophone Caribbean has remained a topic of lament and concern for educators and researchers over the years (Bryan, 2010; McCourtie, 1998; Winer, 2006). As Ramsay (2011) points out, among other developmental challenges, students who are more dominant speakers of Jamaican Creole experience added difficulties in writing as they "grapple with deciding what belongs in which language" (p.31), have limited exposure to Standard Jamaican English outside of the classroom, and fail to benefit from the transfer of writing skills from their first language as proposed by Cummins (1979) in the interdependence hypothesis, given the largely oral nature of Creoles.

A review of the limited literature on writing in Creole contexts shows a dominant focus on college level writing (e.g., Bain, 2008; Burris-Melville, 2020; Clachar, 2005; Elsasser & Irvine, 1985; Nero, 1997; Ramsay, 2011) relative to writing in the primary years where, as far as we are aware, only one study has been reported (Winch & Gingell, 1994). Another trend worth mentioning is that most studies have adopted an error or discourse analysis approach with a predominant focus on grammar, while a few have taken a broader analytic approach considering student performance across the component skills

of writing. For a clearer synthesis of findings, the research in this section will be divided into two sections—error analysis studies and research exploring the broader component skills of writing.

Error Analysis Studies

In response to government reports of poor writing outcomes among St. Lucian students, Winch and Gingell (1994) investigated the role of the Creole interference in students' English writing by means of error analysis. Findings showed that students' primary challenge lay in the use of speech conventions in their writing rather than issues related to Creole transfer. The study involved 155 students, aged 9 to 11, who completed both a narrative composition and a letter of complaint. Most participants were selected from four underperforming schools (based on the national writing assessment test) while a sample of British children served as the comparator group. Each script was marked by three evaluators using a scale of 1–5 for overall impression, with the final score the being the average of the three scores. Writing errors were then categorized into four groups: (1) the use of speech conventions in writing; (2) misunderstanding genre conventions; (3) Creole interference; and (4) task avoidance.

Findings showed that overall, scores generally clustered at the lower end of the rating scale, with most errors being attributed to the use of speech conventions—a common developmental hurdle for learners irrespective of their first language. Indeed, the researchers reported that though 24 different Creole features were identified across students' scripts in varied measures, no statistically significant relationship between Creole interference and overall ratings was found.

The findings from Winch and Gingell underline the fact out that not all errors in Creole writing result from first language interference, nevertheless, some methodological limitations call for cautious interpretation. Firstly, the suitability of the British primary school writers as a comparator group is questionable, particularly in the absence of important demographic and contextual information (e.g., socioeconomic status, nature of writing instruction). Additionally, the conclusions drawn by the researchers have been used to counter arguments of interference (e.g., see Seigel, 2006). However, the results indicated that when combined, syntactic and morphological transfer errors were marginally statistically significantly correlated with overall impression scores. Considering that syntax and morphology constitute critical points of divergence between English-lexified Creoles and English, this finding is noteworthy and prompts the question of whether certain methodological issues, such as the impression-based marking approach, might have influenced the findings by reducing the focus on grammatical accuracy in assessment.

In a similar study carried out in Trinidad, Winer (1989) analyzed 896 scripts from students in grades 7 and 11 across 16 schools using an analytic approach to assessment rather than impression-based marking. Error analysis of student scripts showed that while almost half of the errors were "English writing errors," that is, non-transfer errors related to mechanics and writing conventions, 65% of the errors were attributable in some measure to the influence of the Creole on grammar and spelling. Further detailed analysis of Grade Seven scripts revealed interesting findings with significant implications for teaching and assessment. Winer (1989) found that despite a significant number of transfer-related errors, student scripts showed striking levels of communicative competence which the researcher attributed to positive transfer from the home language to the school language. This communicative competence, according to Winer (1989) and Craig (1978) is due to higher receptive knowledge of English on the part of Creole dominant speakers, relative to learners more typically deemed as second language learners. However, the researchers argue that, at the same time, this communicative competence can mask underlying writing challenges resulting in the tendency for Creole students to plateau and to continue to produce errors and fossilized structures, which can go unnoticed in holistic or impression-based writing assessments (Craig, 1978). This finding may provide some insight into the results reported by Winch and Gingell (1994) showing no statistically significant impact of Creole transfer-related errors on overall writing outcomes and underlines the pivotal role of assessment approaches in writing. Winch and Gingell (1994) scored scripts subjectively for "impression"—that is, an overall holistic approach was taken to marking student scripts. Writing research however has shown holistic marking to be less rigorous and reliable in identifying areas of challenge in writing (Cooper & Odell, 1977; Hayes et al., 2000) and for informing intervention (Gregg & Mather, 2002) than criterion-based or analytic approaches. Should the scripts have also been marked using a more analytic approach, it is likely that interference errors, which were present primarily in morphosyntax, would have emerged as more prominent in student writing as has been the case among learners at the secondary (McCourtie, 1998) and tertiary levels (Burris-Melville, 2020; Nero, 1997) as well as among speakers of similar language varieties such as AAVE (Horton-Ikard & Pittman, 2010) and West African Pidgin English (WAPE) in the primary years (de Kleine, 2006).

Evidence of writing challenges related to Creole transfer in English writing have also been reported among college students in the Caribbean diaspora (Clachar, 2005; Nero, 1997). Using discourse analysis to investigate Creole influence in speech and writing, Nero (1997) examined the written compositions of four Anglo-Caribbean students who were enrolled in a remedial basic college

writing course over the span of a year. The sample included two students from Jamaica and two from Guyana. One student was identified as basilect-dominant, another as mesolectal, and two as mesolectal to acrolectal speakers. Nero carried out oral interviews and analyzed both formal and informal writing over the span of a year with a focus on five key morphosyntactic features that distinguish the Creoles from English: subject-verb agreement, tense marking, plural marking, use of the possessive, and the copula.

Findings showed that all scripts showed evidence of Creole influence on morphosyntax, with the amount of Creole features varying according to the student's level of English proficiency. The basilect-dominant student used the Creole unmarked verb almost exclusively, along with some Creole-influenced phonetic spellings. The mesolectal-dominant student and one of the mesolectal-acrolectal students' scripts were indicative of increasing English proficiency, displaying an interlanguage that included some Creole features and an overapplication of verb-related English morphosyntactic rules. The other mesolectal-acrolectal student's scripts aligned with the English acrolect—showing minimal evidence of Creole influence.

An important feature of Nero's study is the classification of participants based on language dominance—an approach seldom employed in research on Creole writing. By taking language dominance into account, greater clarity is provided concerning the difficulties faced by learners with different levels of English proficiency. Additionally, this practice helps to mitigate the potential influence of language proficiency as a confounding variable, recognizing that not all Caribbean students are dominant in Creole.

Research Exploring Performance Across the Component Skills of Writing

Very few studies have taken a broader approach to writing assessment beyond error analysis, and as such, no firm conclusions can be drawn from the limited data, though some trends have been identified. Consistent with findings from the error analysis studies, grammar presents as the area of greatest challenge for learners who were more dominant speakers of Caribbean Creoles or similar non-standardized languages. However, in addition to grammar, compositional length, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and organizational skills have also been highlighted problematic for such learners.

As part of a two-phase study exploring Creole language education in Jamaica over three decades, McCourtie (1998) analyzed archival data in the form of annual reports on student performance during in the colonial era to identify the factors contributing to the failures of the Jamaican language education system. Findings showed that writing presented as the most consistent area of challenge and failure for students. In the subsequent phase, McCourtie investigated the nature of writing outcomes among Jamaican learners in secondary school to assess whether improvements were made over the years. A total of 530 grade 9 students from 24 schools across the island participated by completing both a narrative and an expository writing task which was marked by assessors who were unaware of the study objectives. Results indicated poorer performance on the expository task, with only five students successfully completing the writing task, albeit at a basic level. Additionally, most students struggled with using the present tense and plural morpheme -s [z]—an issue attributed to Creole interference given the general absence of these markers in the home language. For the narrative task, the primary challenge was compositional length—none of the 530 scripts were reported to be of sufficient length to meet national or international assessment standards. In addition to compositional length, scores for ideation and originality were low overall, and most scripts showed evidence of linguistic challenges (e.g., grammar, spelling).

When scripts were ranked according to scores, while the highest-ranked group (7.4% of the sample) demonstrated some control over English grammatical forms in terms of sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling, assessors reported that their writing "could not be regarded as mature, highly competent piece of writing for a 15-year-old" (p. 119). The middle-ranked group showed some knowledge of English grammatical forms but produced worryingly brief scripts. Group Three, representing the majority (72.1%), faced challenges in grammar, tense usage, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. They also exhibited the least evidence of risk-taking in writing by using very simple sentence structure and vocabulary, as well by writing very brief scripts—which the researcher attributed to linguistic insecurity. McCourtie's (1998) findings concerning the specific writing challenges are not exclusive to Caribbean Creole speakers but have been echoed in research among speakers of non-standardized language varieties like West African Pidgin English (WAPE).

West African Pidgin English is spoken in the Anglophone countries along the west coast of Africa including Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Alongside Caribbean Creoles, WAPE belongs to the group of Atlantic Creoles that find their genesis in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and which therefore share structural similarities particularly as it relates to verbs (de Kleine, 2006). de Kleine (2006) explored the writing challenges experienced by speakers of WAPE in grades 6–12, enrolled in Limited English Proficiency classes in the United States. She reported strikingly similar trends as those seen among Caribbean Creole speakers. Assessment of 98 descriptive texts showed that students experienced challenges in both basic transcription skills as well as in higher-order skills of

vocabulary, grammar, and organization. Learners at the lowest English proficiency level were most challenged in the area of organization. However, grammatical errors, and to a lesser extent, spelling mistakes, were pervasive across all proficiency levels. Grammatical errors encompassed issues such as the lack of articles, the absence of plural, possessive, and tense markers, as well as challenges with subject-verb agreement and copula usage—patterns in line with findings from speakers of some Caribbean Creoles (Burris-Melville, 2020; McCourtie, 1998; Nero, 1997). These findings were also corroborated by ESL teachers, who identified grammar as the primary writing challenge for students.

Extant literature has highlighted numerous issues surrounding the writing development of learners with Creoles as home languages both in the Caribbean and farther afield. However, there is a significant gap in the research among younger learners in the primary years that focuses on a wider range of writing skills. Research among primary school learners in Jamaica is particularly important at this time considering a recent government report which stated that 56% of learners leave primary school unable to write in English—the language of literacy (The Jamaica Education Transformation Commission, 2021). To contribute to filling this gap in the literature and to provide concrete recommendations for improving writing outcomes among primary school learners in Jamaica and the wider anglophone Creole, an empirical study exploring the writing challenges experienced by Jamaican primary school learners will be presented in the remaining sections of this article.

Writing Challenges Among Primary School Learners: The case of Jamaica

As part of a larger mixed-methods project (Tucker, 2023), the present study explored the nature of writing challenges experienced by Jamaican Creole-speaking students in the primary years with the aim of informing instruction and broader language education policy. Within the context of the study, writing outcomes are viewed in reference to the official language of literacy—Standard Jamaican English, not with the aim to present the Creole as deficient, but rather to highlight the unique complexities of writing development for Creole dominant learners and thus highlight areas in need of greater pedagogical support and innovation in research.

Research Question

1. What are the areas of challenge in Standard Jamaican English writing for students who speak Jamaican Creole as their dominant and home language?

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the not-so-simple view of writing (NSVW) (Berninger, 2000; Berninger & Winn, 2006). Within this framework, writing is conceptualized as consisting of three component processes operating within working memory: transcription, text generation, and executive functions. Transcription involves the translation of sounds into symbols through handwriting and spelling. These lower-order skills are generally acquired earlier than others, such as text generation, which involves the translation of ideas into text through oral language at the word, sentence, and phrasal levels. Transcription and text general skills are in turn guided by executive functions such as goalsetting and revision strategies. Within the NSVW model, a lack of automaticity and deficits in lower-order skills place a greater burden on working memory, thus constrain the efficient execution of the higher-order processes responsible for the development and translation of ideas into text.

While the writing outcomes of Caribbean Creole-speaking students are likely explained by a host of multifaceted and inter-related learner and contextual factors, the aim of the present study is to explore the nature of challenges experienced by Creole dominant learners in the primary years. As such, the NSVW, which conceptualizes writing in terms of learner factors (i.e., orthographic, language-related, and cognitive skills), and has been found to be predictive of writing outcomes among both first and second language learners of English (e.g., Babayiğit, 2014; Graham & Eslami, 2020; Ndlovu, 2010) is adopted. As the NSVW has not been examined within a Creole context, findings may serve to expand the theoretical applications of the NSVW.

Methodology

The present study adopts a cross-sectional design involving the collection and analysis students' narrative writing samples alongside background measures of grammatical knowledge and non-verbal reasoning at one time-point. In this way the study findings provide a descriptive snapshot of writing challenges, rather than a developmental understanding of writing in a Creole context. In the subsequent sections, the study context, sample, and data collection instruments are described.

Setting

Two pieces of contextual information are important in situating this study: the immediate fieldwork setting and the wider ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic that marked the data collection period and changed the nature of

educational instruction and research. Firstly, classroom data collection took place in a rural Jamaican town. The center of commerce in the bustling town is the popular local market that attracts farmers, higglers, and shoppers from across the island. In addition to farming and vending, residents generally work as teachers and in the service industry as hotel staff, helpers, taxi drivers, and as civil servants. Given the nature of these jobs, most residents generally have a low to modest income, thus resulting in a flatter socioeconomic spread compared to more metropolitan areas of the island with wider variation in income, education levels, and household resources.

The second contextual factor relates to the timing of data collection. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, data collection took place online—a factor which has both methodological and interpretive implications. Moving school online introduced a host of factors that resulted in the exclusion of many students from schooling, and by extension, from this study. All activities in this study were carried out online and therefore relied on a stable internet connection which often proved to be a challenge for some students due to electricity outages and limited access to the internet and devices—issues which are generally more prevalent in rural areas like the study context.

Recruitment and Sampling

The study population included typically developing Creole dominant primary school students in Grade 6 (11- and 12-year-olds) at Jamaican public schools. Two types of primary-level education are available in Jamaica—public and preparatory (private) schooling—the former being free of cost and located throughout the country, and the latter charging relatively high tuition fees and more commonly located in high SES communities within urban centers. Based on the research objectives, it was important to recruit a sample that included a significant number of students who were likely to speak Jamaican Creole as a home language and who would therefore be representative of the majority of Jamaican children in the public education system. A purposive sampling approach was therefore taken to recruit students from two public schools in a rural town where a higher proportion of the student population would be more likely to speak Jamaican Creole as a home language than would be found in a "prep school" in the nation's capital.

The study sample consisted of 42 typically developing students in Grade 6 (mean age: 11.4) from the two government-funded primary schools in a rural town—22 of whom were boys and 20 of whom were girls. All students in the sample were identified as being more dominant speakers of Jamaican Creole based on the sampling approach described the upcoming section. School One is in the south-end of the town and is the larger of the two schools included in the study (MoEY, 2020; National Education Inspectorate, 2011), while School Two is located at the north-end of the town. While School One is larger, there are no systematic differences between the schools in terms of socioeconomic status or learner populations, as students attend the school closest to home or the school with available space at the time of enrolment. Across both schools, all teachers completed formal teachers' college training for primary school education and confirmed following the National Standards Curriculum (MoEY, 2018) as mandated by the Jamaican government. Additionally, both schools confirmed using the same Language Arts textbook which is based on the National Standards Curriculum (MoEY, 2018) and listed on the Ministry of Education's website—"Primary English Across the Curriculum" (Narinesingh & Seetahal Maharaj, 2020). At the time of data collection, students were being prepared for the high stakes national primary school exit exam (PEP)—a pivotal time in the education of Jamaican learners that determines secondary school placement.

Sampling Based on Language Dominance

The aim of the study was to be able to highlight the writing challenges of Creole dominant learners in order to better understand and serve this population. Therefore, while the Creole continuum has three main points (basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal), the decision was made to focus on children who were more dominant speakers of Jamaican Creole based on language usage and proficiency. In this way, children who were able to speak a mesolectal variety but were also highly proficient in Standard Jamaican English were not included in the sample as they would not be likely to experience the same challenges as another with lower levels of Standard Jamaican English proficiency. Given the complexities of language grouping in a Creole continuum, a triangulated approach was adopted to determine participants' language dominance, based on usage and performance. In its initial formulation, data sources included: teacher reports of language usage and proficiency, a grammaticality judgment test, and home language background questionnaire. However, due to low response rates from parents, the latter instrument could no longer be used to determine language dominance. Additionally, while it would have been ideal to also carry out oral interviews with each student as has been done in prior research (e.g., Nero, 1997), due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and limited access to WIFI for many students, this was not possible. Learners were therefore classified as Creole dominant based on teachers' language usage and proficiency reports as well as performance on a grammaticality judgment task. Once the study sample was identified (n = 42), checks were made to ensure that Creole dominance was not being conflated with more general challenges related to cognitive and reasoning ability.

Teacher Reports

Following clear prompts, classroom teachers provided reports on students' language usage and dominance in a series of meetings with the primary researcher. Teacher reports were first piloted at the lower grade levels (Grades 3 and 5). Results showed that for more clear-cut cases teachers were able to make language dominance judgments with ease as evidenced in their comments during a debrief (e.g., X-student speaks Jamaican Creole most of the time, Y-student hardly speaks English, Z-student never speaks Jamaican Creole, X-student struggles in English oral language skills). However, further discussion with the researcher and reference to oral language performance of students was particularly necessary to aid judgments and to mitigate conflation of language dominance with general academic performance. Thus, the process of language group allocation was iterative in nature. Teachers were first asked to provide an initial list categorizing students as: "Jamaican Creole," "English," or "mixed/unsure," based on their language usage (language usage with the teacher, classmates) as well as their proficiency in English based on their overall performance in oral language assessments. In this initial list, teachers were instructed to categorize students as "Jamaican Creole" or "English" *only* when the cases were clear and obvious and to place all other cases in the "unsure/mixed" category. Straightforward cases in which both sources leaned strongly to one language were decided first. That is, participants for whom teachers in the first instance could make a confident judgment of their home language and whose scores on the GJT aligned with teacher judgments were allocated first. For example, a child who a teacher deemed to speak Jamaican Creole as a home language by their teacher and whose score on the GJT fell well below the sample average was allocated to the Jamaican Creole language group. However, in a few instances ($n=8$), allocation was not as straightforward and was carried out on a case-by-case basis through further teacher–researcher conferencing. For such cases, in addition to referencing the score on the GJT, additional information was sought from teachers concerning students' English language proficiency as reflected in performance on their most recent end of term language arts assessments, particularly in the oral language module as well as the grammar and conventions module. It was generally found that when teachers initially placed a student in the mixed/unsure category, following further discussion, these students were assigned to the Jamaican Creole group ($n=6/8$). A sample of the discussion guide used with teachers is presented in Appendix A.

Grammaticality Judgment Task

To obtain a measure of language proficiency, a researcher-developed grammaticality judgment task (GJT) was used to assess grammatical knowledge of four key constructs that distinguish Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English which have been used in the literature: subject-verb agreement, tense marking, personal pronouns, copula deletion (e.g., Clachar, 2005; Malcolm, 2021; Nero, 1997). In this way, the GJT served as a performance- or proficiency-based data source. In keeping with the oral nature of Jamaican Creole and in line with guidelines for accessing implicit grammatical knowledge as much as possible (Mackey & Gass, 2015), the GJT was administered orally (read by a native Jamaican speaker). The task included 22 simple sentences to which students provided a YES/NO decision. Each grammatical construct being tested in five sentences (e.g., "Him gone to him house") and two distractor items were included that did not test any of the key grammatical constructs.

Sample items from the GJT are included below:

1. My friend love mangoes. * (subject-verb agreement)
2. We love our school. [DISTRACTOR ITEM]
3. He climb the tree yesterday.* (unmarked tense)
4. The boys run to school.
5. My friend sick today. * (copula deletion)
6. Him gone to him house. * (invariant pronoun)

Non-Verbal Reasoning Ability

Once the sample ($n=42$) was selected for the study, a further check was made to ensure that teachers were not conflating language dominance with more general challenges related to cognitive ability and reasoning skills. As part of the larger study from which the sample for the present study was drawn, the Matrix Reasoning subset of the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI-II; Wechsler, 2011) was administered to all Grade 6 students at both schools regardless of their language dominance ($n=90$), as a background measure of non-verbal reasoning ability. The sample from the larger study included the students deemed to be more dominant speakers of Jamaican Creole ($n=42$) who were included in the present study, and the rest of their peers in Grade 6 who were not identified as being Creole dominant ($n=48$). The task involves pattern completion wherein participants are presented with a matrix of images and are required to select the image that best completes the pattern from a list of five options. In the absence of locally developed measures, non-verbal measures of cognitive ability have been identified as a more suitable form of testing when working cross-culturally and in linguistically diverse contexts (Fraine & McDade, 2009). The WASI-II Matrix Reasoning task was deemed most suitable as the non-verbal nature of the test meant that participants with greater English proficiency did not have a linguistic advantage over those more dominant in the Creole. In terms of content and structure, the Matrix Reasoning subtest uses neutral stimuli that are less impacted by culture or socioeconomic status and was judged as having

TABLE 3
Comparison of Non-verbal Reasoning between Creole Dominant and Non-Creole Dominant Learners

	Creole dominant	English dominant[a]	Mann–Whitney U	p
	Mdn	Mdn	(standardized)	
WASI-II	12	12	.68	.50

[a]This group refers to the rest of students in Grade 6 from the larger study who were not identified as being Creole dominant.

ecological relevance (structure and content) by teachers and school administrators. Teachers confirmed that the test items mirrored those in the Mental Ability subtest of the National Primary Exit Profile exams (PEP) for which the students were being prepared. However, as the instrument is norm referenced on a UK population, only raw scores were used in this study. As seen in Table 3, findings showed no group differences between the students included in the study sample (Mdn = 12) and their peers from the larger study who were deemed to be more dominant speakers of English (Mdn = 12), $U = .68$, $p = .5$.

Written Expression Task

In keeping with the theoretical framework, students completed a narrative writing task which was assessed with reference to both lower- and higher-order component skills of writing. Students' writing was assessed using the writing analysis measure (WAM) (Dunsmuir et al., 2015). In line with the NSVW, the WAM is an analytic rubric that assesses writing with reference to lower- and higher-order skills including handwriting, punctuation, spelling, grammar and sentence structure, vocabulary, organization, and ideas. While originally developed to align with the writing targets outlined in the National Curriculum for England and Wales (Dunsmuir et al., 2015), the instrument's targets mirror the benchmarks for written expression outlined in Jamaica's National Standards Curriculum (MoEY, 2018), with one exception being the expectation of cursive writing in the UK. This requirement was therefore removed (see Appendix B). According to the rubric, students received a rating from 0 to 4 for each component, with the total possible score being 28. In addition to its suitability for the Jamaican context, this instrument was chosen because of the analytic approach taken to scoring texts. Analytic scoring provides a more detailed assessment of writing through the evaluation of individual component skills (e.g., vocabulary, organization, sentence structure) in one piece of writing (Dunsmuir et al., 2015) and has been found to have greater reliability and validity than holistic measures which tend to be more subjective in nature (East, 2009; Espin et al., 2004). Additionally, analytic scoring provides greater insight into the areas of strength and weakness in writing thus proving more instructive for the development of writing interventions due to its explicit focus on component skills of writing (Gregg & Mather, 2002).

Though example prompts are provided with the WAM, the key component is the rubric. Adopting the WAM therefore allowed for greater flexibility in tailoring a prompt that suited students' background knowledge and their collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. A prompt from the WAM was adapted to match the nature of narrative writing prompts from sample PEP exam papers online (e.g., A day at the beach). As the prompt did not require students to write about a specific type of experience (e.g., A Day at the Museum) it proved to be accessible to children with different experiences as seen below.

Written Expression Task

"Imagine that when the COVID-19 pandemic ends you could go anywhere on a trip with your family. You could go anywhere at all. Write about where you would go and the things you would do."

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out during regular scheduled online Language Arts lessons. Students completed the WASI-II Matrix Reasoning task and the grammaticality judgment task in an online format which allowed for the direct submission of student scripts once the task was complete. For the written expression task, students were shown the prompt on the screen while hearing it read twice. They were told by the primary researcher and their classroom teachers that the writing task was similar in nature to the written expression tasks in the PEP exams for which they were preparing at the time. Students were first given the opportunity to ask questions before officially starting the exercise. Prior to starting, and throughout the task, students were instructed to write as much as they could during the allotted time. They were then given 15 min to complete the task with regular encouragement to keep writing. Students were asked to keep their cameras on so that they could be monitored. It was essential that students provided handwritten as opposed to typed scripts as it would not be possible to assess handwriting skills and autocorrect and predictive text functions would mask students' actual control of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and syntax skills. As a result, students were required to submit a clear picture of their handwritten work at the end of the task. This procedure was recommended by the schools and received ethical clearance.

Scripts were scored iteratively by two markers using a detailed rubric: the primary researcher and a local teacher with training in Special Education and Literacy who was unaware of the specific study aims and did not work at either of the schools in the study. To increase the reliability of the assessment process, the two markers first met

together to discuss and practice applying the WAM by assessing five sample scripts together (from the pilot study sample). Detailed examples provided in the WAM rubric were also consulted in the training process. Each marker then independently scored an initial 10% of scripts according to the WAM rubric after which inter-rater reliability was checked and discrepancies discussed. In the first instance, inter-rater agreement was moderate, ICC = .63, 95% CI = −.28–.91. In subsequent discussion, discrepancies were identified as being largely due to the second reviewer's admitted tendency to provide more lenient marks to "encourage students." It was therefore necessary to highlight the diagnostic nature of the task, reiterate that students would not receive their scores, and carefully review the rubric (including examples) once more. Subsequently, another 10% of scripts were scored by both markers and inter-rater reliability was checked once again. Altogether, 20% of scripts were marked by both assessors, achieving excellent inter-rater reliability (ICC = .98, 95% CI .91–1). The remaining scripts were then marked by the primary researcher.

Findings

Results showed relatively low performance with participants having a mean score of 12.52 out of a possible 28. Tables Four and Five present the findings concerning student performance across the component skills of writing outlined in the WAM. While Table Four provides a snapshot of student outcomes with scores being aggregated into "low" and "high" ratings, Table Five outlines a more detailed frequency distribution showing students' performance across all the skill areas and rating categories. As seen in Table 4, over 86% of Creole dominant learners received scores at the lower end of the rating scale for all skills except for handwriting. Unsurprisingly, grammar emerged as the most challenging area for Creole dominant learners, closely followed by organization, ideation, vocabulary, spelling, and to a slightly lesser extent, punctuation (Table 5).

TABLE 4
Frequency Distribution of Ratings across Skill Areas (Aggregated)

Skill area	0–2 (%)	3–4 (%)
Handwriting	50.00	50.00
Spelling	85.66	14.23
Punctuation	76.18	23.82
Grammar	97.61	2.39
Vocabulary	88.09	11.91
Organization	95.24	4.76
Ideas	90.47	9.53

TABLE 5
Frequency Distribution of Ratings across Skill Areas and Scoring Levels

Skill area	0	1	2	3	4
Handwriting		7.14	42.86	38.09	11.9
Spelling		21.43	64.23	14.29	0
Punctuation	9.52	23.8	42.86	23.81	0
Grammar		69.04	28.57	2.38	0
Vocabulary		52.38	35.71	11.9	0
Organization	2.38	47.62	45.24	4.76	0
Ideas		38.09	52.38	9.52	0

Spelling

The majority of learners (86%) received ratings for spelling that were on the lower end of the scale, which as per the rubric, corresponded to spelling common monosyllabic words (rating of one; 64% of learners) or most high frequency words (rating of two; 21% of learners) correctly. A small portion of the scripts (14%) showed attempts at spelling complex words using phonetic strategies (e.g., "*slightering*" for "slithering," "*spegeti*" for "spaghetti") and therefore received a rating of three. Overall, only one spelling error appeared to be possibly attributable to Creole transfer where the student spelled "Eifell Tower" as "*Highfull Tower*," but this could also have been an eggcorn and so overall, there was no significant evidence of phonological interference in spelling from the Creole.

Punctuation

Alongside "organization," punctuation was the only other skill, where based on the descriptors, a script could receive a score of zero. Scripts received a rating of one for punctuation if at most, they showed "awareness of how full stops are used in writing." Twenty-four percent of scripts received a rating of one, while 10% received a rating of zero—showing no awareness of how full stops nor any other form of punctuation is used in writing (i.e., no punctuation was present in any form). Most scripts received a rating of two, which corresponded with scripts showing some evidence of students' ability to use capital letters and full stops accurately, even if only a few times in their texts. Another 24% received a rating at the higher end of the scale (i.e., three) which represented the secure usage of full stops and capital letters as well as the presence of other forms of punctuation (e.g., question marks, commas) being used correctly most of the time. As with most skills, no student received a rating of four which in the WAM, corresponded with the ability to "use a range of punctuation to clarify structure and create effect (e.g., speech marks, dashes, brackets, apostrophes, commas to demarcate sentences)."

Sentence Structure and Grammar

The overwhelming majority (98%) of students received a rating on the lower end of the scale for grammar and sentence structure. Sixty-nine percent of these students were given a rating of one, which according to the rubric, meant that they were only able to write simple sentences and make use of basic conjunctions such as "and," but struggled with more complex sentences, conjunctions, and the correct use of tense and other morphosyntactic structures such as subject-verb agreement. The scripts of those who gained a rating of two (28%) showed evidence of the beginning use of a wider range of conjunctions to build compound sentences while still experiencing significant challenges with grammar (i.e., mixing up tenses). Four percent of scripts received a rating of three—showing greater evidence of extended sentences and the use of subordination. For these scripts, the basic grammatical structure of sentences (e.g., tense, noun, and verb agreement) was usually correct. No script was judged as showing secure and accurate usage of complex sentences and control of English morphosyntax—the requirement for full marks (i.e., 4).

Though no formal error analysis was carried out, it is worth commenting on evidence of language transfer in student scripts. In line with the orthographic description, morphosyntax represents a key linguistic area where transfer is generally most evident or expected in the English writing of Creole dominant speakers. In addition to the dominant use of simple sentence structures, morphosyntactic errors linked to the Creole were also common (e.g., unmarked tense, absence of subject-verb agreement, serial-verb usage) with student scripts showing evidence of Creole structures. One such example is provided in Figure 1. Though describing past events, the student generally used the unmarked verb (e.g., I hear the water running, I go to the water slide). The student also uses serial-verb structures which are only present in the Creole and not in Standard Jamaican English (e.g., we walk go up a hill), as well as Creole sentence constructions (e.g., nearly to reach), and displays challenges with sentence structure (e.g., run on sentences, subject deletion). These findings highlight challenges not only in sentence structure but also at the level of morphosyntax.

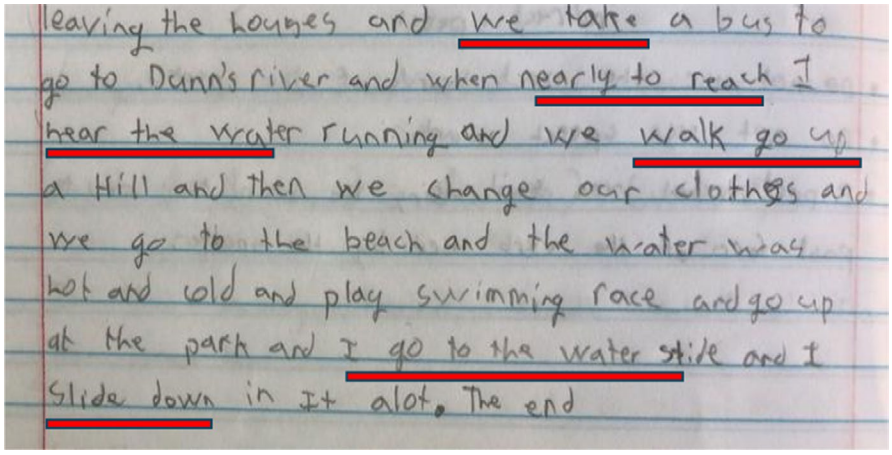
Vocabulary

Most students received ratings on the lower end of the scale for vocabulary (88%)—a somewhat unexpected finding, at least initially, given that vocabulary represents the area of greatest overlap between Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English. Fifty-two percent (52%) of student scripts were characterized by an exclusive reliance on simple nouns and verbs (e.g., eat, play, see, go), thus receiving a rating of one. Thirty-six percent (36%) of scripts showed evidence of students beginning to incorporate some more interesting and varied vocabulary in writing (e.g., involve, experience), while a smaller percentage (12%) of students used more varied adjectives and verbs in their texts and showed greater specificity in their selection of nouns (e.g., habitat, "luxary" (i.e., "luxury"), jersey). No student in the sample received the highest rating which was awarded for the appropriate usage of more vivid, descriptive, and engaging vocabulary.

Organization

Organization emerged as one of the more challenging areas for learners in this study, following grammar and vocabulary, respectively. In addition to punctuation, organization was the only other skill area in rubric where a small percentage of scripts (2%) received a rating of zero based on the criterion descriptors. Higher scores (three or four) were awarded for cohesive texts characterized by the development of meaning and themes across well-organized paragraphs. Most students in the sample received a rating of one (48%) or two (45%) which corresponded to either communicating some meaning, but jumping from idea to idea in a list-like fashion

FIGURE 1
Sample Text Highlighting Transfer of Jamaican Creole Morphosyntax


leaving the houses and we take a bus to go to Dunn's river and when nearly to reach I hear the water running and we walk go up a Hill and then we change our clothes and we go to the beach and the water is hot and cold and play swimming race and go up at the park and I go to the water slide and I slide down in it alot. The end

without expansion or showing some evidence of expanding upon themes, but only across a few sentences, respectively. A smaller portion of students who received a rating of three (5%), used paragraphs (even if short) to expand on themes to varied extents and to organize their texts.

Ideation

Based on the WAM rubric, higher scores in ideation were awarded for creative, imaginative, and engaging ideas that were fleshed-out ideas using varied strategies and techniques. In contrast, scripts received lower scores if ideas were short and underdeveloped—resembling more of a list without additional descriptive detail (e.g., emotions, settings, actions). Most scripts received a rating of two (52%), wherein, though limited, the author was beginning to add descriptive detail to their main ideas, or a rating of one (38%) where ideas were presented in a list-like nature without descriptive development. Ten percent (10%) of the sample produced scripts consisting of imaginative ideas with varied levels of descriptive detail concerning the setting, emotions, and characters.

Additional Trends

Compositional Length

Though not accounted for in the WAM, compositional length emerged as a significant challenge for many learners (see Figures 2 and 3). Despite being encouraged to continue writing as much as they could throughout the allotted time, many students wrote very short texts—an issue likely linked to the challenges in other component skills of writing highlighted above.

Discussion

While research in Creole contexts has largely highlighted the significant challenges that Creole-speaking students experience in grammar, findings from the current study show that beyond grammar, learners also are challenged in both lower-level transcription skills as well as higher level text generation skills. The NSVW proposes that writing consists of three component processes functioning within a working memory environment—transcription, text generation, and executive functions. Lower-level transcription skills are generally mastered first and once automatized, free up cognitive space for text generation at the word, sentence, and phrase levels. Accordingly, deficits in transcription skills place a greater burden on working memory which then curtails efficient text generation at the word, sentence, and text level. Within this framework, given the low levels of performance in transcription skills of handwriting, spelling, and punctuation, Creole dominant learners experienced significant challenges in text generation at the word, sentence, and text level.

Transcription Skills

Findings showing learner challenges in transcription skills add support to the small but consistent body of research highlighting spelling and punctuation as areas of significant challenge for Creole dominant students, across all levels of education (Burris-Melville, 2020; de Kleine, 2006; McCourtie, 1998). In terms of spelling, low ratings in spelling were not linked to phonological Creole interferences but instead, as per the WAM rubric (Dunsmuir et al., 2015), were owing to the general tendency of spelling common monosyllabic (e.g., cat, bat, boy) or high

FIGURE 2
Example of Short Text Length (1)

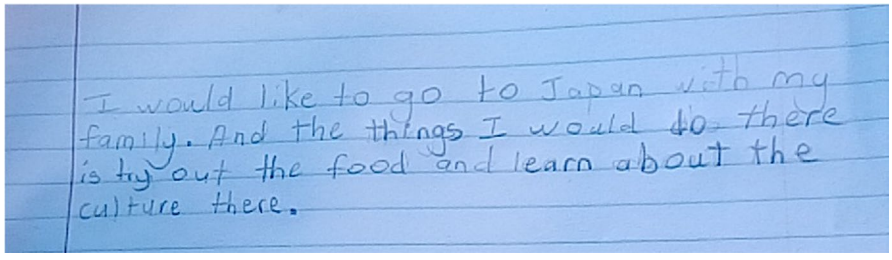
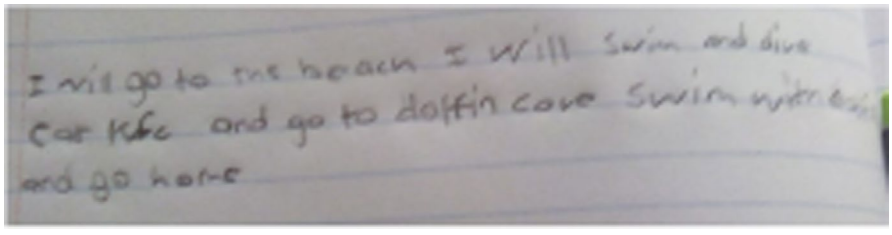


FIGURE 3
Example of Short Text Length (2)



frequency words (e.g., because, while, inside) while avoiding more complex words. This finding has obvious links to vocabulary knowledge where over 88% of learners received a low rating. Learners were very conservative in their written vocabulary, relying on monosyllabic and high frequency words which in most cases they were able to spell correctly. However, this practice resulted in lower spelling scores due to an absence of more complex words in their texts (whether attempted or spelled correctly).

Oral language Skills

Grammar

Grammar emerged as the area of greatest challenge in writing for learners in this study. This finding is unsurprising given the language typology and the consistent body of research highlighting the grammatical challenges experienced by creole speakers in writing (Burris-Melville, 2020; Clachar, 2005; de Kleine, 2006; McCourtie, 1998; Nero, 1997, 2014; Nero & Stevens, 2018).

In the present study, learners showed evidence of Creole transfer in verb morphosyntax (tense and subject-verb agreement)—as has been consistently reported in earlier studies (Burris-Melville, 2020; de Kelin, 2006; McCourtie, 1998; Nero, 1997; Nero & Stevens, 2018; Winer, 1989), and also through the use of serial verbs—a finding not reported in previous research. Nevertheless, consistent with findings from Winer (1989), Winch and Gingell (1994), and McCourtie (1998), Creole transfer was not the sole cause of grammatical errors in writing, as Creole dominant learners also experienced significant difficulties in sentence structure—writing incomplete or very simple sentences. Indeed, McCourtie (1998) reported that learners with Jamaican Creole as a home language took fewer risks in writing by producing very simple sentences—a tendency which McCourtie (1998) attributed to learners' "linguistic insecurity." The findings in the study show that learners experience grammatical challenges not only in morphosyntax but also in sentence structure (i.e., sentence complexity) and therefore need greater instructional support in distinguishing the grammars of their home and school languages and building grammatical skills for Standard Jamaican English writing.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary emerged as the second most challenging aspect of writing for Creole dominant learners. Such a trend is strikingly consistent with findings from research among learners with English as an additional language in the Global North (e.g., Babayiğit, 2014; Silverman et al., 2015; Woolpert, 2016). Consistent with wider research practice, the WAM rubric measured vocabulary largely on the dimension of diversity. Vocabulary diversity has been found to be a significant predictor of writing quality for both first (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Harrison et al., 2016) and second language speakers of English (Babayiğit, 2014). Though 90% of the Jamaican Creole lexicon is adopted from English, the 90% still only represents a relatively small subset of the English lexicon. Given that Jamaican Creole functions as an oral language in Jamaican society and is largely used for informal and unofficial purposes that do not necessarily require a wide range of vocabulary, it cannot be assumed that children who speak Jamaican Creole as a home and dominant language function as first language speakers of English in vocabulary. Rather, learners may need greater instructional and home literacy support in building both their receptive and productive vocabularies for writing.

Ideation and Organization

Both higher level skills of organization and ideation proved especially challenging for learners. In terms of organization, similar findings have been reported among learners with West African Pidgin English as a home language, where de de Kleine (2006) found that learners encountered significant challenges in organizing their texts. Consistent with the predictions of the NSVW, as learners struggled with the lower-level transcription skills and higher level oral language skills at the word and sentence level, it is unsurprising that they also experienced significant challenges in the higher level skills of ideation and organization. Beyond the predictions of the NSVW, challenges in organization and ideation can likely be explained at least in part, by learners' challenges with compositional length. McCourtie (1998) identified a similar challenge in a study of 530 Jamaican students in Grade 9, where external graders consistently reported that across all writing proficiency levels, students' texts were not of a length to meet national or international assessment standards. Based on the WAM rubric used in the present study, higher scores in ideation were awarded for interesting, engaging, and fleshed-out ideas rather than short and underdeveloped ones. In the area of organization, higher scores were awarded for the development of ideas and meaning across well-organized paragraphs. Therefore, students who wrote only a few lines or a sentence in response to the prompt received lower scores for ideation and organization.

Altogether, the study findings highlight that beyond grammar, Creole dominant learners experience significant challenges in transcription skills such as spelling and punctuation, as well as higher-order skills such as vocabulary, ideation, and organization. These findings are consistent with research among older Caribbean learners in both the secondary (McCourtie, 1998; Winch & Gingell, 1994; Winer, 1989) and tertiary school years (Burris-Melville, 2020). Accordingly, the findings highlight the need for more timely and suitable assessment, as well as early intervention in the primary years to address the unique writing challenges experienced by learners in Creole contexts.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with moving assessment online and their implications for the interpretation of the study findings. As discussed, in response to COVID-19 school closures and the resulting switch to online schooling, data collection instruments, and procedures were adapted for remote administration. Such changes introduced limitations in the areas of sampling and assessment. Carrying out research online in a rural town meant the automatic exclusion of learners with no access to the internet or devices (i.e., laptops or tablets), thus resulting in some level of sampling bias in the present study. As students have returned to in-person schooling in Jamaica, replication is recommended as sampling bias can now be better controlled. Additionally, while efforts were made to maintain methodological rigor, it is important to acknowledge that these changes likely impacted the reliability and validity of the findings. Some key limitations associated with remote data collection in the study include changes in task demands, variation in working conditions across student homes (e.g., availability of a quiet room), and increased opportunities for cheating.

The cross-sectional nature of the study also introduced limitations. Considering the time-related limits of online schooling and the cost of internet access for students, school administrators only allowed the administration of one writing assessment. The use of multiple writing samples would have strengthened the validity of the study findings, particularly as writing quality tends to be influenced by topic (Fitzgerald, 2008) and the fact that students were being assessed in less-than-ideal period (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic). Nevertheless, the study findings still provide some worthwhile insight into the English writing challenges experienced by learners in creole-speaking contexts. The study results also corroborate findings from studies among learners at various educational levels in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Future in-person research in Jamaica will stand to benefit from the collection and analysis of a variety of writing samples across different genres, to gain clearer insight into the nature of writing among learners with Jamaican Creole as a home language.

Determining language dominance in the creole-speaking context is never a straightforward process. Due to parents' low completion rates of the language background questionnaire, language dominance was decided based on teacher reports of student's language usage and proficiency as well as student performance on a GJT. While great effort and systematicity was employed in the process of sampling, the use of three, rather than two data sources would likely have strengthened the sample selection process.

Recommendations

Altogether, the findings from the present study highlighting the challenges experienced by Creole dominant learners in the Caribbean have implications for both pedagogy and research. While there is no one-size-fits-all intervention, findings point to the need for responsive and adaptive pedagogy wherein teachers reflect on the nature of challenges experienced by students in classes and tailor instruction to meet these needs. Given the nature of the Creole continuum, Jamaican learners stand to benefit from instructional approaches that include the systematic differentiation of the Creole and Standard Jamaican English (e.g., tense marking)—an approach that has proved instrumental in helping learners differentiate between closely related varieties spoken in bidialectal contexts (e.g., Cyprus: Yiakoumetti, 2006) as well as in Jamaica (Devonish & Carpenter, 2007). Such an approach would not only support language awareness skills but also facilitate the celebration and validation of students' linguistic resources.

Creole dominant learners will likely benefit from instruction targeting their key areas of challenge (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, spelling) at least initially and from greater practice in crafting more complex sentences and using more diverse vocabulary. As research has shown statistically significant associations between compositional length and both transcription and text generation skills for both first and second language learners of English (Graham & Eslami, 2020; Kent & Wanzek, 2016; Santangelo & Graham, 2016), it is likely that targeting lower-level transcription skills as well as oral language skills (grammar and vocabulary) will serve to improve issues with compositional length and ultimately, in line with the NSVW, free up greater cognitive resources for ideation and organization.

In the Caribbean, the use of suitable assessment measures such as analytic rubrics will play a key role in teachers' ability to pinpoint areas of challenge among students in need of instructional intervention. For example, in the current study, somewhat surprisingly, vocabulary emerged as a significant area of challenge among learners based on analytic assessment. Teachers could respond to this need through the provision of opportunities to not only build receptive vocabulary through activities such as shared book reading, but by providing more opportunities for students to push this knowledge into productive use through creative writing tasks, role play, and expressive vocabulary games, for example. It is important to point out however, that in order to meet student needs, Caribbean governments will need to support both pre- and in-service teachers through the provision of context-sensitive teacher training, as well as clear curriculum and policy directives concerning literacy education.

Finally, findings showing poor performance across all component skills of writing for Creole dominant learners highlight the need for more research exploring the writing challenges experienced by this population beyond grammar. Such research can serve to guide home-grown interventions and approaches for writing instruction for Creole speakers in the Caribbean and the wider diaspora.

Beyond Jamaican shores, the findings also have implications for teacher development and pedagogy in the Global North where numerous Caribbean immigrants are enrolled in educational programs, and often face challenges in English academic writing (e.g., Clachar, 2005; Nero, 1997). A significant challenge to providing culturally and linguistically sensitive support for these learners in the US in particular, stems from the fact that students of Caribbean provenance are often unhelpfully classified as "African Americans," despite their distinct linguistic backgrounds (Tucker & Murphy, 2023). In such contexts, teachers stand to benefit from professional development courses that raise awareness of the nature and structure of Creoles as well as the stigma attached to these languages by wider societies, and often, by the students themselves. In addition to increasing language awareness, such programs should highlight key areas of challenges generally experienced by Creole speakers in English writing and provide relevant training in the adoption of translingual pedagogical approaches that strengthen productive English language skills, while harnessing students' entire linguistic repertoire. Such practices may include, but are not limited to, language awareness instruction, code-switching, code-meshing, and translanguaging (Milson-Whyte, 2013). In adopting these awareness-based and translingual (Canagarajah, 2013; Milson-Whyte, 2013) approaches, schools and teachers will be better equipped to help immigrant students navigate not only their linguistic, but also their cultural and racial repositioning in the writing classroom (Smith, 2023).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics Statement

Ethical Approval was granted by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee for Education at the University of Oxford (Reference no.: ED-CIA-21-033). All participants and stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, teachers) were provided with participant information documents outlining the nature of the study and ethical commitments and provided their consent to both participate in the study and to have their data published once the study was complete. All participants agreed that only pseudonyms would be used where relevant to maintain privacy. The research team has retained the participant information documents and the signed consent documents in accordance with university policy and as outlined to all participants and stakeholders in the study.

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APPENDIX A

Sample of language dominance form used with teachers

Participant: #34		
Initially placed in the "mixed/unsure" category by teacher		
Final allocation: Jamaican creole		
Additional information	**Response**	**Notes/relevance**
Does this student perform at a low level/ struggle in all or most subject areas?	No	This was to ensure that language dominance was not being conflated with overall ability
Oral assessment *(end of term exams)*	Below average	
Grammar conventions assessment *(end of term exams)*	Below average	
Overall performance in English	Low performance	
Language to you	Mixed	
Parents language & interactions with child	Creole dominant, sometimes English	
Language to classmates	Creole dominant	Creole
Performance on GJT	12/22	Well below sample average (i.e. 17)

APPENDIX B

Adapted Writing Analysis Measure (Dunsmuir et al., 2015)

Writing Assessment Measure (WAM)	
TIME GUIDELINE Prompt 1: 15 minutes minutes of writing	**DISCONTINUE RULE** Stop the child after 15
Elements and Criteria	**Circle Score**
Handwriting	
• Writing is consistent, fluent, and neat. Cursive is no longer a requirement in Jamaican schools.	**4**
• Mostly clear and legible.	**3**
• Handwriting may vary in shape and size and is beginning to develop consistency.	**2**
• Handwriting is indecipherable or difficult to read.	**1**
Spelling	
• Evidence of correct spelling of complex words containing prefixes/suffixes or irregular words e.g. souvenir, destruction, and conscious.	**4**
• Attempts to spell some complex or polysyllabic words using visual or phonetic strategies, e.g 'safariye' for safari, 'adventerous' for adventurous.	**3**
• Spells the majority of high frequency common words correctly e.g. inside, because, while.	**2**
• Spells some common monosyllabic words correctly (e.g. mum, cat, bird). Uses phonic strategies to attempt to spell high frequency common words e.g. 'grat' for great, 'fhun' for fun.	**1**
Punctuation	
• Uses a range of punctuation to clarify structure and create effect (e.g. speech marks, dashes, brackets, apostrophes, commas to demarcate sentences).	**4**
• Secure use of full stops and capital letters. Uses punctuation in addition to capital letters and full stops, the majority are used correctly (e.g. question marks, exclamations marks, commas in lists.	**3**
• Evidence of accurate use of capital letters and full stops, however few there are. (e.g. Sentence finishes with a full stop and next sentence begins with a capital letter)	**2**
• Shows awareness of how full stops are used in writing.	**1**
• No evidence of awareness of how punctuation is used in writing.	**0**
Sentence Structure and Grammar	
• Secure control of complex sentences. Understands how clauses can be manipulated for effect. Able to use conditional and passive voice (e.g. having watched him eat a dog biscuit, she felt sick)	**4**
• Beginning to write extended sentences including subordinators (e.g. if, so, while, when, after). The basic grammatical structure of sentences usually correct (e.g. usually consistent and correct use of tenses and nouns and verbs agree).	**3**
• Beginning to use other conjunctions to create compound sentences (e.g. because, but, so, then) and may be using multiple clauses (still mixing up tenses).	**2**
• Writes simple sentences which include the conjunction 'and'.	**1**
Vocabulary	
• Demonstrates use of well-chosen vivid & powerful vocabulary to create effect (e.g. verbs, adjectives, adverbs)	**4**
• Varied use of adjectives, verbs and specific nouns (e.g. delicious for nice/sauntered for went/poodle for dog)	**3**
• Some selection of interesting and varied verbs e.g. jumped, compare, guess	**2**
• Uses simple vocabulary, appropriate to content. Writing is composed of simple nouns and verbs e.g. look, went, go, play, see	**1**
Organisation and Overall Structure	
• Paragraphs are well organised, based on themes and provides a cohesive text for the reader (e.g. paragraphs, subheadings, logically organised events).	**4**
• Uses paragraphs to organise writing, showing an identifiable structure. May be short sections.	**3**
• Themes are expanded upon and linked together in a series of sentences.	**2**
• Communicates meaning but may 'flit' from idea to idea and any themes that are expanded are done so in one sentence.	**1**
• No meaning or idea communicated in text/student writes single sentence.	**0**
Ideas	
• Ideas are creative and interesting in a way that engages the reader. Uses a range of strategies and techniques such as asides, comment, observation, anticipation, suspense, tension.	**4**
• Ideas are imaginative and varied evidence of descriptive detail about characters, settings, feelings, emotions & actions.	**3**
• Ideas are developed to by adding detail (e.g. is beginning to provide additional information or description beyond a simple list. Produces short sections of ideas which may be repetitive and limited in nature.	**2**
	1