

Choice of classroom language in bidialectal communities: to include or to exclude the dialect?

Androula Yiakoumetti^{*}
University of Cambridge, UK

The issue of dialect and education and, in particular, the issue of which code to use as the medium of instruction has generated much heated debate in bidialectal societies. This debate is reflected in the literature on language policy in education which is divided into three main areas: (i) the use of the standard variety as medium of instruction; (ii) the use of a non-standard dialect as medium of instruction; and (iii) bidialectal education, which involves the use of both. The goal of this study is to gather empirical evidence which may inform on the potential benefits of bidialectal education. Specifically, the study attempts to cast light on the relationship between the use of the dialectal mother tongue in the classroom (as a comparative tool for the learning of the standard) and written school language production. An intervention-based study was carried out in primary schools in the bidialectal Greek-Cypriot community of Cyprus. The participants received language learning delivered in both the dialect and the standard variety. Analysis of students' written language production was carried out in terms of location of the school (urban *vs.* rural) and gender of the learners (girls *vs.* boys). The findings clearly indicate a number of educational advantages of making use of the dialectal variety in the classroom. The Cypriot sociolinguistic setting is discussed in the context of other bidialectal settings.

Introduction

A bidialectal situation is one in which the standard and a non-standard variety of the same language are used alongside each other. The two varieties differ linguistically but are at the same time sufficiently related so as to overlap somewhat in pronunciation, grammar and lexicon. Issues related to bidialectal education which have attracted substantial research interest include the African-American English debate (Fairchild & Edwards-Evans, 1990; Rickford, 1997), the Australian Aboriginal English situation (Kaldor & Malcolm, 1985; Malcolm *et al.*, 1999), and the case of Caribbean Creole-speaking immigrants in Britain (Feigenbaum, 1975; Edwards, 1976, 1979; Dalphinis, 1986, 1991;). The current work attempts to

^{*}Churchill College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 0DS, UK. Email: ay212@cam.ac.uk

open up another line of enquiry that pertains to the study of regional dialects (rather than social, ethnic or minority dialects) and moves the emphasis away from the English language. As previous research (Siegel, 1999b; Simmons-McDonald, 2004) has evidenced that forcing students to use only the standard variety in the classroom can stifle learning, this study aims to encourage the use of students' regional dialectal mother tongue in the classroom alongside the targeted standard variety.

The standard *vs.* non-standard debate in bidialectal contexts has been linked to educational underachievement, with the co-existence of standard and dialectal grammar giving rise to problems in educational systems that are predicated on the use of the standard language (Edwards, 1989). This is why the issue of which language code to use as the medium of instruction in bidialectal societies has generated much heated debate. Some researchers (Custred, 1990; Pavlou, 1990) argue from the point of view of national unity that the standard variety should be the one used as a medium of instruction. Valdman (1989) explains that one of the reasons provided for Creole or minority dialects not being used officially in formal education is that they are stigmatized and not seen as ordered, systematic languages, but rather as degenerate varieties of the particular standards to which they are lexically related. On the opposite end, there are researchers (Lind & Johnston, 1990; Gfeller & Robinson, 1998) who advocate that the local regional dialect should function as the medium of instruction for formal schooling since this is the code most intimate to the speakers. As Siegel (1999a) notes, some researchers who fall in this category use sociopolitical arguments for the inclusion of non-standard varieties in education. For instance, the use of creoles in education has been advocated to counteract neo-colonialism (Devonish, 1986). Finally, some researchers (Epstein & Xu, 2003; Yiakoumetti, 2006) advocate bidialectal education, which involves the use of both the standard and the dialectal variety. The goal of this study is to gather empirical evidence that may inform on the potential benefits of bidialectal education.

The Greek-Cypriot bidialectal community of Cyprus serves as the reference point of the study as it provides excellent conditions for exploring how having a regional dialect (Cypriot dialect, CD) as a mother tongue affects performance in the standard (Standard Modern Greek, SMG). For convenience and brevity, any mention hereafter of Cyprus and Cypriots should be understood to refer strictly to the Greek-Cypriot community. The importance of the standard is emphasized in the current study because of the social and professional benefits its use conveys, rather than because of any inadequacy or inferiority of the dialect. Cyprus is especially interesting for its immoderate educational language policy which ignores the existence of the dialect. In Cyprus, children are taught as though SMG is their native variety. Teachers simply correct the 'errors' (dialectal interference) and reinforce SMG through repetition. Such an approach no doubt helps to perpetuate the pervading view that the dialect is inferior to the standard. (For information on Cypriots' language attitudes towards the two varieties, see Papapavlou, 1994, 1998; Pavlou, 1997; Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2000.) It must be noted that, in the whole of the Cypriot National Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1996), no acknowledgement is made to the fact that the CD is the actual mother tongue of

Cypriots; SMG is treated as the native language. Moreover, no allusion is made to differences between the varieties of the home and the school or to any transitory stage that may assist in moving from the first to the second.

While taking into consideration the sociolinguistic landscape and the educational system on the island, this study attempts to cast light on the relationship between the use of the dialectal mother tongue in the classroom (as a comparative tool for the learning of the standard) and school language production. The discussion is of interest to an international audience because it relates to bidialectal communities in which non-native everyday language usage is confined to certain niches such as formal education.

Bidialectal learners and language performance

Despite considerable effort spent researching dialect and education, a common concern remains: 'dialect speakers continue to underachieve at school and a realistic remedy for this has yet to be found' (Cheshire *et al.*, 1989, p. 8, and see also James, 1996; Epstein & Xu, 2003). When non-standard dialect speakers appear to exhibit underachievement in the language class, what may be the explanation? The blame may be attributed to the fact that the children are bidialectal. However, the above explanation fails to note the advantages that an education incorporating the dialectal variety can offer and, perhaps unwisely, may seek to reduce departures from the standard by further skewing the language of education towards the standard (Epstein & Xu, 2003).

As Edwards (1983) notes, children who speak a dialect other than the standard face additional difficulties when compared with their standard-speaking counterparts. While even standard speakers have instances of confusion (e.g., between formal and informal uses of language), non-standard speakers have many more instances of these differences to remember and are therefore presented with many more opportunities for error. Valdés (1995, 2001) points out that one of the problems associated with learning a second dialect (the standard) is the fact that learners are not always aware of the exact differences between the first and second dialects.

Corson (1993) makes a distinction between the receptive (reading and listening) and the productive (speaking and writing) use of the standard variety by dialectal users. He notes that, in the first case, non-standard users are faced with few practical problems because children nowadays have constant exposure to the standard variety through daily contacts with the mass media. In other words, children have the opportunity to both read and listen to the standard frequently. Consequently, no threat to the interests of non-standard speakers results from the regular demand in schools that they engage in reading and listening (receptive exposure) to the standard, provided that the mother tongue is maintained to a high level of proficiency at the same time. While reading and listening may thus be mainly unaffected, oral and written production can nevertheless be problematic. This study is concerned with the written production of students. (For Cypriot students' oral production, see Yiakoumetti *et al.*, 2005.)

A notable example of a research project that documents dialectal pupils' linguistic performance in oral and written production is the one carried out in the municipality of Gennepe in the Netherlands (Giesbers *et al.*, 1988). The project aimed to investigate the possible existence of a relationship between speaking a Dutch dialect as a mother tongue and school achievement in primary education. The majority of language tests demonstrated that standard-speaking children were at an advantage. When dialect speakers had to use the standard for communication—especially in highly specialized tasks such as letter writing or group discussion—they did not perform as well as their standard-speaking peers. However, the researchers explained that dialect speaking did not seem to be an educational disadvantage *per se* because they found highly inconsistent difference patterns when other language skills were tested, with dialect speakers doing well in some measures and standard speakers doing well in others. To the authors this meant that the possible disadvantages of dialect-speaking were produced by very subtle factors such as teachers' attitudes towards the dialect, pupils' attitudes towards the school, differences in communicative habits, and, of course, the degree of divergence between the dialect and the standard all playing their roles.

Having the above in mind, a system that suppresses the home language and forcibly promotes the standard is likely to be part of the explanation of dialectal students' underachievement (Baker, 1993; Wolfram *et al.*, 1999). However, when the educational system is pluralist, incorporating variety and drawing on the similarities and differences of the varieties, the varieties can be well developed and true bidialectism is fostered. James (1992) calls such an approach 'interfacing' and emphasizes the benefits that can be drawn from juxtaposing or confronting D1 and D2 and helping the learner to notice the differences between them (James, 1980, 1996). The result is a conscious awareness in the sense of language awareness (James & Garrett, 1992).

In the US and Australia, dialect awareness or language awareness approaches (Adger, 1997; Wolfram, *et al.*, 1999) have already been adopted. These programmes have focused on the study of dialect diversity to teach students not only about the structure of vernacular dialects but also about their role in speech communities. It has also been found that explicitly teaching the linguistic differences between African-American English and standard English reduced interference from African-American English in the writing of university students (Taylor, 1989). Furthermore, Harris-Wright (1999) demonstrated that there was greater progress in reading and improved verbal scores by students in the DeKalb Bidialectal Communication Program which used a contrastive approach to make students aware of differences between African-American vernacular English and standard English. In Europe, a relevant study done in Scandinavia (Bull, 1990) found that reading proficiency in the standard variety increased when children learnt to read in their non-standard dialect in conjunction with the standard variety. Finally, the 'Kerkrade Project' was carried out in the Netherlands to measure changes in performance after the dialect was introduced in schools alongside the standard. This was done with reference to standard Dutch and the Kerkrade dialect (Stijnen & Vallen, 1989; Van den Hoogen & Kuijper, 1989). The

findings supported the researchers' initial hypothesis that the use of dialect in the classroom would increase the rate of participation of dialect-speaking children. Moreover, analysis showed that encouraging the use of dialect in the classroom increased language quality and confidence of expression.

Adopting a broad view, there is a tendency to ascribe negative characteristics to speakers of non-standard varieties (Garrett *et al.*, 1999). However, the association between the use of non-standard varieties and lower academic ability can be described as a form of linguistic discrimination (Bex & Watts, 1999). This study follows the recommendation, made by a plethora of research studies, that non-standard varieties can be utilized with considerable educational benefits in the school environment. In the present case, the aim is to introduce the regional dialect of Cypriot students into the classroom for the facilitation of the standard variety.

Setting and aim of the study

As already noted, two linguistic varieties are used on the bidialectal island of Cyprus: the regional Cypriot dialect (Cypriots' actual mother tongue) and Standard Modern Greek (the educational variety). (For information on the domains of usage of the two varieties, see Sciriha, 1995, 1996; Moschonas, 1996, 2000; Panayotou, 1999; Karyolemou & Pavlou, 2001.) A great number of differences between the CD and its standard counterpart exist at the lexical level because the dialect includes many loanwords that the standard does not contain (Papapavlou, 1994). The two also differ very significantly at the phonological and morphological levels and, to a lesser degree, at the syntactic level.

The linguistic situation in Cyprus has recently attracted a great deal of attention from academics, linguists and educationists on the island (Charalambopoulos, 1990; Iordanidou, 1991; Christodoulou, 1997; Pavlou & Christodoulou, 2001; Papapavlou, 2004; Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004) and it has been suggested that the phenomenon of bidialectism affects learners' performance in the standard, leading to dialectal interference in their SMG writing at school.

This study attempts to measure students' written performance in the standard in an effort to identify the degree of the claimed dialectal interference. It also introduces the students' regional mother tongue into the classroom and explicitly compares the two linguistic codes. This is done to examine whether usage of students' native variety in the classroom can result in a better separation of the two codes and in a consequent reduction of dialectal interference.

Research methods

Design

An intervention-based study determined by a quasi-experimental design was applied. The decision to take this approach was based partly on the fact that, because all pupils and teachers are native speakers of the dialect, differences in dialectal language abilities would be unlikely to confound post-intervention language

assessments. The design involved an experimental group and a control group both given a pre-test and a post-test. This paper deals with the experimental group alone. For a comparison between the experimental and control groups, see Yiakoumetti (2006).

Participants

Ninety-two students from entire final-year primary-school classes (11- and 12-year-olds) from two schools in the Larnaca district (an urban and a rural school) participated in the intervention. Fifty-three students (23 boys and 30 girls) came from the urban school and 39 students (18 boys and 21 girls) came from the rural school.

Intervention

The intervention involved exposure to a language learning method specially constructed for the project. Learning material in the form of a short textbook was developed. The textbook drew on the similarities and differences between the CD and SMG and trained experimental students to consciously separate their two linguistic codes and transfer from their local variety to the standard without including dialectal interference. Social and sociolinguistic information was provided alongside grammatical exercises, a suggestion put forward for sharpening skills and facilitating comprehension in classroom-based dialect awareness programmes (Howard, 1996; Martínez, 2003).

The textbook comprised four chapters, dealing with comparisons between the two varieties in terms of phonology (chapter one), grammar which included morphology and syntax (chapter 2), lexicon (chapter 3) and a combination of all four categories (chapter 4). The types of activities appeared in the forms of (i) word equivalence; (ii) classification of differences; (iii) transference of Cypriot words, sentences and texts into SMG; (iv) rule provision; and (v) description of pictures using the standard variety.

The textbook was independent of the curriculum since the programme introduced new elements, such as the linguistic comparison of the CD and SMG, which is not currently part of the traditional method of language learning on the island.

Two principles were taken into consideration when producing the textbook.

Student familiarity with topics covered. All the activities of the student's book (stories, exercises, background information) were based around topics familiar to the Cypriot pupils. The immediate surroundings and experiences of the children were used as a starting point, and from there facts about language were discussed. The rationale for discussing matters which were commonplace but nevertheless interesting was to hold students' attention sufficiently so that they were receptive to revelations about language patterns without being distracted by new detail.

Use of authentic material. Authentic recorded oral speech was crucial to the programme. Authentic dialectal material concerning topics relevant to the pupils was expected to be more likely to stimulate interest because the speech was 'their

own'. This feeling of familiarity was expected to make students more vocal and willing to express their opinions more freely.

The programme was applied for three months on a daily basis, replacing 50% of the traditional language classes (occupying 45 of the 90 minutes devoted to language teaching). The four teachers who adopted the programme were trained by the researcher prior to its commencement. The researcher oversaw the planning and direction of the intervention as she constructed the textbook and tests. The teachers were invited to make alterations based on the students' level of maturity (e.g., clarity of the instructions of the exercises and the language of the textbook to accommodate the age of the students). It should be noted that statistical analysis revealed no significant effect of the teacher factor on students' performance.

Measurement

The effects of the intervention were evaluated by means of written language pre-tests and post-tests. Specifically, evaluation of students' written production took the form of a language and a geography essay. The essay topics for the language class were as follow: 'My school excursion' (Test 1), 'My favourite movie' (Test 2) and 'How I spend my free time' (Test 3). The essay topics for the geography class were as follow: 'The pros and cons of tourism' (Test 1), 'My town' (Test 2) and 'I do not forget occupied Cyprus' (Test 3). These essays were set in the same way as the normal weekly in-class essays. Because of this, students were unaware of their assessment and thus contamination of data was minimized. The language of the essays was SMG, as is required by the Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture. The choice to assess students' geography essays (and not only their language essays) was made in order to investigate whether improvement was transferred to other (non-language) topics. Assessment was based on the factors of location (urban *vs.* rural) and gender (girls *vs.* boys) and took place in three different periods: prior to the intervention, mid-way through and right after the intervention's application. (A fourth test also took place three months after the completion of the intervention. However, this test does not pertain to the current analysis. For a discussion of the fourth test, see Yiakoumetti, 2006.) Interlingual errors (i.e., dialectal grammatical and lexical features that enter the standard variety) alone were measured (and not intralingual errors that are not caused by dialectal interference). This was done by relying on the differences between the CD and SMG listed by a number of researchers (Newton, 1972, 1983–1984; Contossopoulos, 1994; Papapavlou, 1994). This was therefore an unambiguous assessment criterion as it was based on actual, documented linguistic differences. The unit of measurement was the number of CD occurrences detected per 100 words. The potential for differences in essay length to influence dialectal interference is rendered negligible by the proportional nature of this measure. All statistical tests were conducted at the significant level of 5%.

For information on other aspects of the general project, see Yiakoumetti *et al.*, (2005: oral performance and language attitudes) and Yiakoumetti (2006:

classification of dialectal interference into phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical categories).

Ethical issues

Initial permission to carry out the study was granted by the Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture which approved the teaching and learning material as well as the design of the study. Further permission was granted by the participating schools' headmasters, teachers and the students' parents. To ensure validity, the students and their parents were not informed of the precise focus of the study until after the intervention had been completed. This arrangement was made with their consent. All participants are treated anonymously.

Results

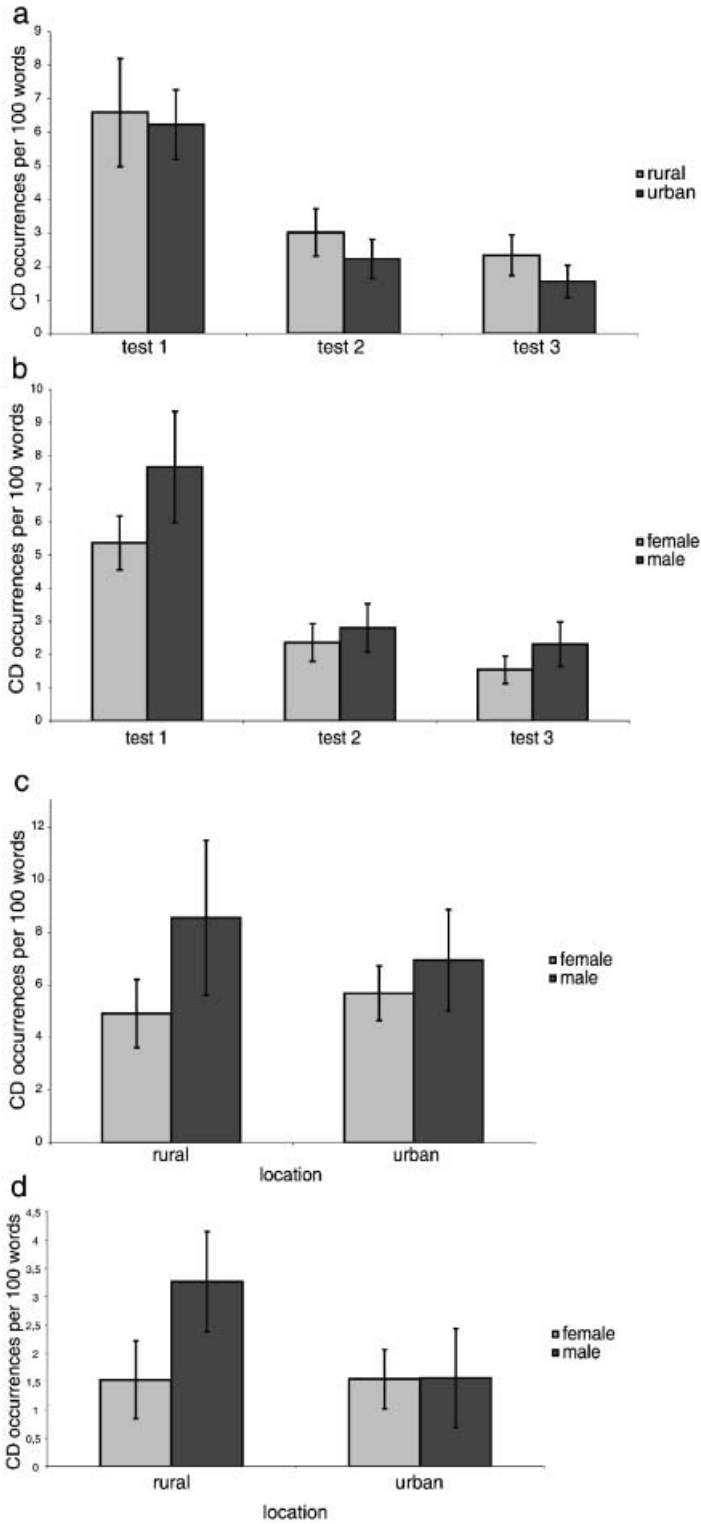
Language essay writing

The data were analysed with respect to location and gender to see if the intervention programme affected students from urban and rural schools differently, and also whether it affected girls and boys differently (Figure 1). Location ($p=0.043$), as well as gender ($p=0.013$), had a statistically significant effect (Figures 1(a), 1(b)). However, the interaction between location and gender revealed that the difference in performance between girls and boys was not consistent between the two locations (gender \times location interaction, $p=0.029$). Girls and boys in the rural school performed significantly differently in Test 1 ($p=0.027$) (Figure 1(c)), but this difference fell to just below the threshold of significance by Test 3 ($p=0.062$) (Figure 1(d)).

Geography essay writing

The data were again analysed with respect to location and gender (Figure 2). Location had a highly significant effect ($p<0.001$) for the geography essay (Figure 2(a)). In the first test, prior to the intervention programme, there was a significant difference between students from the urban and rural schools ($p<0.001$), whereas in the second test, after the intervention had commenced, this difference had disappeared ($p=0.385$). The effect of gender was not significant ($p=0.060$), but differed for the two locations (gender \times location interaction, $p=0.016$) (Figures 2(b), 2(c)).

Figure 1. (a) Performance of students from rural and urban schools over three language essays, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words; (b) performance of female and male students over three language essays, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words; (c) performance of female and male students from rural and urban schools in Language Essay Test 1, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words; (d) performance of female and male students from rural and urban schools in Language Essay Test 3, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words



Discussion

Rural vs. Urban

It should again be emphasized that the mother tongue of both rural and urban Cypriots alike is the regional Cypriot dialect and not SMG. Everyone learns Greek at school and all schools follow the same teaching methods. There is thus no *a priori* reason to expect greater dialectal interference in the classroom production of rural pupils than that of urban pupils. Any difference between the two groups should be related more to the frequency of dialectal occurrences than to the incidence and prevalence of the various types of interference. The pre-test based on the geography class revealed a statistically significant difference between the performance of the urban and rural groups, with fewer dialectal occurrences being detected in the urban group. This was the first empirical evidence relating to the bidialectal community of Cyprus that suggests a difference in written performance between urban and rural children. This finding is also in accordance with Cypriot teachers' views. They believe that rural children's disadvantage in relation to urban children is clearly visible in their writing. However, no statistically significant difference between the performance of the urban and rural groups was detected in the pre-test based on the language class. The basis of the inconsistent performance difference in the language-based and geography-based tests is uncertain but may be due either to the fact that the geography essay was more demanding of the students' language skills or that it encouraged students to focus on the content and neglect their language usage.

Overall, location affected students' written performance, both for the language and the geography essay writing, with students from the urban school performing better. The difference in the rate of improvement between the urban and rural school for the geography essay attests to the disproportionate improvement by rural students. The consequence of this greater improvement was that by Test 3 ($p=0.672$), rural students performed just as well as urban ones. Such an improvement suggests that inclusion of the dialect alongside the standard in formal education can not only have positive effects on all learners but that it might also be disproportionately beneficial to rural speakers.

Girls vs. Boys

The effect of gender was significant for the language essay writing; overall, girls performed better than boys. However, this difference depended on the location of the school. Despite considerable overall improvement in both sexes, boys consistently performed more poorly than girls in the rural school ($p=0.019$; Test 1), ($p=0.002$; Test 3). This was not the case in the urban school, where the performance of boys and girls was not significantly different ($p=0.324$; Test 1), ($p=0.967$; Test 3).

The effect of gender was not significant for the geography essay writing. If, as is possible, the composition style for geography was more constrained than that

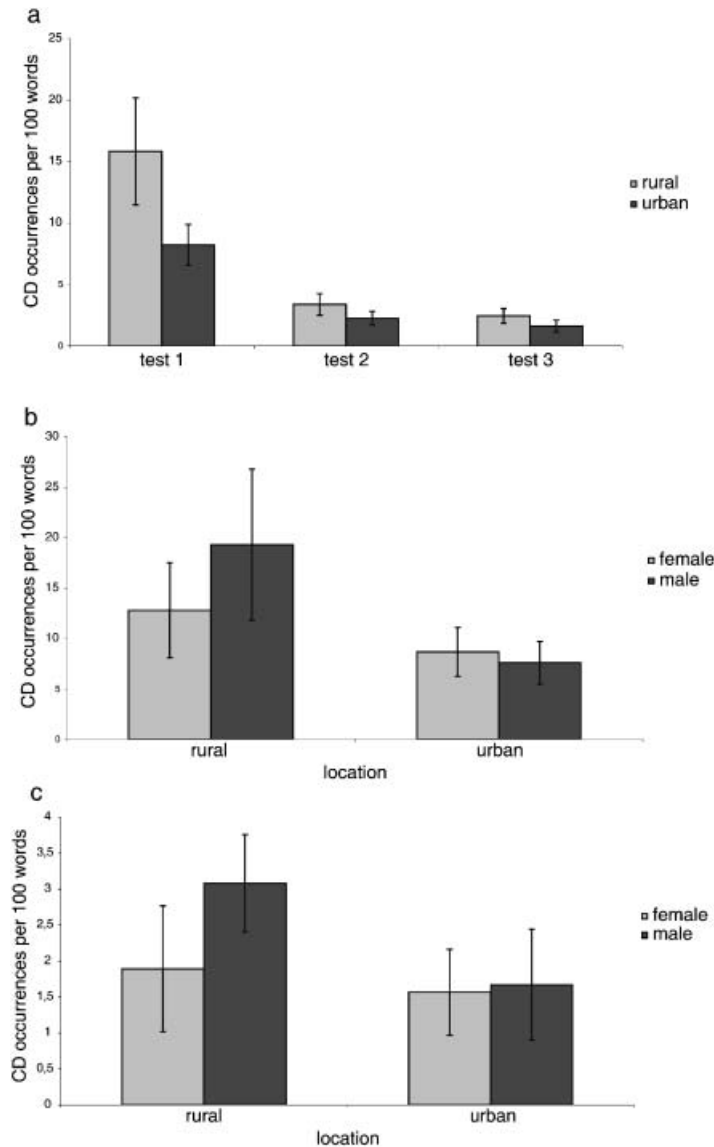


Figure 2. (a) Performance of students from rural and urban schools over three geography essays, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words; (b) performance of female and male students from rural and urban schools in Geography Essay Test 1, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words; (c) performance of female and male students from rural and urban schools in Geography Essay Test 3, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words

which was appropriate for the language essays, there may have been little scope for the detection of a gender difference. Despite the fact that gender *per se* was not significant, there was a strong combined effect of gender and location. As with language essay writing, boys consistently performed more poorly than girls only in the rural school. This suggests that girls may pay more attention to their language

after exposure to the programme, perhaps reflecting a greater sensitivity to sociolinguistic aspects of language. This is in accordance with many sociolinguistic studies which have found that, in bidialectal contexts, girls have more standard features in their language than boys (Ladegaard & Bleses, 2003). Taking the bidialectal situation in Denmark as an example, Ladegaard (2000), indicated that (i) the girls' language was closer to the prestigious standard Danish than the boys' language; and (ii) gender differences (with boys using more regional dialectal features in their language) were more significant in the rural context.

Conclusion

The current study empirically demonstrated that, prior to any intervention, the choice to exclude the dialect from the classroom in line with the current educational policy in Cyprus has resulted in 'negative transfer' of dialectal features to learners' production of the standard. This finding indicated that a new approach is in dire need. The study also revealed that the choice to include the dialect in the classroom alongside the standard variety does not result in dialectal interference. On the contrary, dialectal interference is reduced and the two codes are better separated. This is evidence that, once children were made aware of the features that are SMG and are not SMG, they applied their knowledge to increase the appropriateness of their usage.

This study is novel because, for the first time, location was shown to be a significant factor in Cypriot students' written performance, with students from the rural school (and especially boys) including more CD occurrences in their writing. More research is needed in this area. Perhaps the suitability of employing differing pedagogical approaches in rural and urban school settings needs to be assessed. At the very least, useful guidance to teachers about non-standard dialects in general should be provided (Wolfram *et al.*, 1989). Perhaps part of the solution also lies in the material students use (and different textbooks might prove to be more appropriate in rural and urban schools). A potentially instructive example that supports this proposition comes from work conducted in Australia which specifically designed materials on Aboriginal English for students (Walsh & Yallop, 1993; SSABSA, 1996). Tailored accommodation programmes (Teaching Standard English as a Second Dialect, TSESD) were also developed (Kaldor *et al.*, 1982; Malcolm, 1992). As Siegel (1999a) indicates, this approach recognizes and uses the linguistic and pragmatic features of students' dialect. Also, more research is needed in the area of gender as findings revealed that rural boys consistently performed more poorly than rural girls.

The current study should be seen as a first step towards bridging the empirical gap that exists in the field of bidialectism and language education in Cyprus. The above findings can be useful in gaining a better insight into the issue of language in education and for the preparation of appropriate learning material that can facilitate the reduction of non-standard occurrences in the writing of students.

To conclude, the current study suggests that introducing the home variety in the classroom in a conscious, explicit and well-planned way, does not have any detrimental effect on the written production of the standard variety. On the contrary, it helps students by enabling them to better separate their two codes. So, in answer to the question posed in the title, there is mounting evidence that inclusion of the dialect has beneficial effects on language performance.

Notes on contributor

Androula Yiakoumetti is a research fellow in Applied Linguistics at Churchill College, University of Cambridge. She is particularly interested in sociolinguistic aspects of bidialectism and second-dialect acquisition and development.

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