RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

M.Ed. In TESL Program
Language Group Specific Informational Reports

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Language Group: Grebo
Author: Brooke Harrall

Program Contact Person: Nancy Cloud (ncloud@ric.edu)

(U.S. Dept. of State, http://www.state.gov 2007)

Language Group Specific Research Project: Grebo

Brooke Harrall
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Where is Grebo spoken?

- Grebo is spoken by the Grebo tribe of Liberia, which lies on the west coast of Africa.

- Grebo belongs to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family of languages and there are 9 forms of Grebo.

- The Grebo tribe is found in Maryland County, which is located in the southeast and is 10% of the population. (2008 census)

The Languages of Liberia

- The official language of Liberia is English and is the first language of 20% of the population. There are 34 ethnic group languages. Most of which are oral and not written.

- The population of Liberia is 3,786,764 (2011) and half of the people speak English as a second language.

- English is used for instruction in schools, mission schools and university education.

- The most common English spoken in Liberia is "Liberian English," which is a creole form.

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(No author, https://www.cia.gov , 2001)

Grebo: A member of the Ethnic Cluster Kwa

- The Kwa ethnic group is made up of seven different indigenous tribes; Bassa, Belle, Dey, Grebo, Krahn, Kru and Sapo.

- These tribes share commonality in culture and linguistics.

- The Bassa tribe has the 2nd largest number of native speakers of an indigenous language.

- The Bassa alphabet, also known as the VAH script is the writing system of this branch of the language family.

- It consists of 23 consonants, 7 vowels and 5 tonal marks.

The Dialects of Grebo

- Grebo is a macrolanguage of Liberia and there are 5 dialects of the language:

1)   Barclayville

2)   Central

3)   Gboloo

4)   Northern

5)   Southern

*There are sub-groups within each of the dialects.

- Liberian tribal languages are tonal languages, meaning that "words with the same pronunciation that are spoken with different pitches are considered different words."

- Changing the tone from high to low on the same word, could change the meaning of the pronoun. (subject, direct, indirect, etc.)

Phonology: The Vowels

- Grebo is based on a nine-vowel system, therefore learners tend to have a hard time differentiating between the various vowel sounds in English.

- For example: the /i/ in ship tends to be pronounced the same as the /e/ in sheep.

- Also, the sound of the /u/ in pull vs. the pronunciation of the double /o/ sound in pool.

- Speakers of LibSE tend to not weaken the vowels of unstressed syllables and will pronounce words as they are spelt.

- Another common error will be caused by the fact that learners pronounce vowels short and will lead to confusion between voiced and voiceless consonants. For example: write and ride

Phonology: Consonants

- One of the main difficulties that speakers of Grebo will encounter in English is the pronunciation of the voiced interdental fricative (th).

- For example: they /de/

- In syllable final position, it will be pronounced /t/ or /f/

- For example: both /bof/ or teeth /tit/

- Consonant stops (p, b, t, d, k, g), fricatives (f, v, th, s, z, sh) and affricates (ch, j) tend to be devoiced in the final syllable.

- For example: rise /rice/, robe /rope/, pigs /picks/

- Sonorants, specifically nasals are also devoiced.

- For example: time /ta/, small /sma/, tell /te/

Phonology: Consonants

- Clusters also tend to cause difficulties for English learners.

- The liquid consonant /r/ disappears from final and preconsonantal placement.

- For example: carry /ke/

- But will appear in onset clusters.

- For example: tree /tri/ and priest /pris/

- In North American English, speakers might drop consonants, as well. For example, in sand castle, the /d/ might be devoiced.

- This happens much more frequently in Liberian Settler English. For esample: what /we/ or place /ple/

- Also, it is very common to drop nasal segments. For example: think /tek/ or false /fas/

Liberians in the United States

- According to the US census of 2000, there were 25,140 Liberians living in the United States.

- Since the year 2000, there have been more than 14,000 Liberian refugees who have entered the US, bringing the total number of Liberians in the US to more than 39,000.

- Liberian immigrants tend to settle on the east coast. Specifically in New York City and Washington D.C.

- Liberian children come to the United States with limited English and a heavy accent.

- They find accent, tone and the use of idioms of American English challenging to understand and learn.

- However, education is so valued in Liberia, these students are highly motivated.

Liberian Communication Styles

- The most unique custom of Liberia is called the "snapshake" greeting. When shaking hands, each person grasps the middle finger of the other person's right hand with their thumb and ring finger and snap it quickly.

- This form of greeting dates back to when slave owners would break the middle finger of their slave to indicate bondage.

- It began in Liberia as a sign of freedom among former slaves in the 19th century.

(No author, http://mobiusband.com , 2011)

Liberian Communication Styles

- Eye Contact:

  ➢ Direct eye contact is acceptable in Liberia except when a child is being reprimanded by an elder. It is considered disrespectful to look the elder in the eye. However, in the US, lack of eye contact can be misinterpreted as being untrustworthy or careless.

- Hand Gestures:

  ➢ It is considered rude to wag a finger back and forth to gesture for someone to come closer. This gesture is generally saved for dogs.

  ➢ It is common for Liberians to snap to get the attention of someone, especially in a restaurant setting. This would be considered rude in the US.

Resources

Books

Schneider, E. W. (2004). *A handbook of varieties of English: Phonology, 1.* Walter de Gruyter.

Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English : A teacher's guide to interference and other problems. Second Edition.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Internet Sites

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Resources

Maps

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Images

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M.Ed. in TESL Program
Nancy Cloud, Director
Educational Studies Department
Rhode Island College, HBS 206 #5
600 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Providence, RI 02908
Phone (401) 456-8789
Fax (401) 456-8284
ncloud@ric.edu

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