Dialoguing with Future Language Teachers: Interviews with Students of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez

VALIES, Kinsella

Abstract

As part of an ongoing research project, I surveyed and conducted interviews with students as well as faculty members at the University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez. A primary theme was aspects of student and faculty life in Curaçao. In this report, I will focus on the student experience. I start with a brief introduction to the island of Curaçao and the university. I then proceed with an overview of the survey responses that supply demographic information about the student participants and their views on being a student. Finally, I detail a range of responses using the students' original voices to create a vivid description of life as a university student in Curaçao.

Keywords: *Curaçao, intercultural communication, multi-lingual education, university student life*

Introduction

The island of Curaçao

Curaçao is an island nation in the Caribbean that is part of the Royal Kingdom of the Netherlands (See figure 1). Its capital is Willemstad. The island itself measures 444 km² and its population is currently at 154,000 residents. As the island is located in the Caribbean the climate is tropical with year-round lows of 25 and highs of 35 degrees Celsius. Rainfall is highest in November.

The island was discovered by Alonso de Ojeda, one of Columbus' lieutenants in 1499. At the time the Caquetío Arawak natives populated the island. The island remained Spanish until the Dutch conquered it in 1634. It was used as a "pit-stop" for ships between Europe and the Americas during the slave trade. West Africans were taken and transported west to work as slaves on sugar plantations. The slave revolt led by Tula in 1795 was brutally suppressed but not before its momentum spread across the Caribbean. In 1845, Curaçao was one of the six Dutch dependencies in the West Indies that were brought under collective administration. The abolition of slavery came in 1863, about 300 years after the first slaves were bartered on the islands. The

dependencies were reorganized as the Netherlands Antilles in 1954 and granted autonomy in internal affairs. In 2006 the people of Curaçao, along with those of the other islands and the Dutch government, agreed to dissolve the Netherlands Antilles. On October 10, 2010, Curaçao and Sint Maarten became—like Aruba, which had separated from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986—countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Valies, 2021).

Papiamentu is the national language of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire islands. As discussed by Joubert and Perl (2007), Papiamentu is a Creole language. Originally, "creole language" meant the speech of Spanish people born in the Caribbean and black people born in Brazil from African slave ancestors. Linguistically, like most non-official and minority languages, creoles have generally been regarded in popular opinion as degenerate variants or dialects of their parent languages. Because of that prejudice, many of the creoles that arose in the European colonies, having been stigmatized, have become extinct. However, political, and academic changes in recent decades have improved the status of creoles, both as living languages and as object of linguistic study. Some creoles, such as Papiamentu have attained the status of official languages. The name originates from papia, from Portuguese and Cape Verdean Creole papear ("to chat, say, speak, talk"), added by the noun-forming suffix -mento. According to Van Buurt and Joubert (1997), it combines elements of native Arawak, an extinct language that was spoken by natives throughout the Caribbean, African, and immigrant tongues with the colonial language. Linguistic studies have shown that roughly 80% of the words in Papiamentu's vocabulary are of Iberian origin, 20% are of Dutch origin, and some of Americanindian or African origin.

Figure 1: Map of Caribbean: Curaçao (Fabricius, 2002)

One of the world-famous goods manufactured in Curaçao is Blue Curaçao liqueur (see figure 2). It is made with the dried, bitter peels of the Laraha, the Golden Orange that can only

grow on Curaçao. The originator of this liqueur is Curaçao Senior & Co. Liqueur Distillery based at Landhuis Chobolobo.

Figure 2: Curaçaoan liqueur

There were some famous Curaçaoans in Japan, such as Wladimir Balentien, who is an athlete who played baseball for the Yakult Swallows and Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks between 2010–2022 (See figure 3). Also, Andrew Jones (2014) played for Rakuten for about a year.

Figure 3: Wladimir Balentien, Curaçaoan baseball player
(ぽこ太郎, 2014)

The University of Curaçao

The University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez (UoC), formerly known as UNA (University of the Netherlands Antilles), was founded in 1979 and was designated the main university for the Dutch Antilles at that time. It offers bachelor's and master's programs, local internships and career opportunities as well as exchange programs (See figure 4).

Lectures are offered five days a week with class periods of two-hundred minutes. Lectures start early and there are two tracks: 8:00–17:00 and 15:00–21:00. There are no clubs or circles. The languages of instruction are Dutch, Papiamentu, and English, and classes consist of small groups of a maximum of twenty students. There is a dormitory on campus. The UoC consists of five faculties, offering a total of 34 programs in the School of Law, the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Social Sciences and Economics, the Faculty of Arts, and the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Students are local or international from the 6 island nations within the former Dutch Antilles and countries beyond. Most take their classes face-to-face on campus but some of the international students join lectures through Blackboard live video streaming. About ninety-nine percent of the students joining remotely are from Saba and St. Eustatius.

The UoC invited me, a Curaçaoan living and working in Japan, to complete a research project on student life in Curaçao. I spent five days on campus observing classes, taking surveys, interviews, and presenting on Japan. Though I interviewed both faculty and students this report focuses on student perspectives and opinions. I have selected some salient questions and responses relevant to the project theme to present.

Figure 4: University of Curaçao entrance gate

Survey responses

Fifteen students completed an English language survey at the end of a presentation on Japan. Depending on their age group and major some felt more comfortable answering in either Dutch, Papiamentu, or English. Providing English language responses in a short time (7 minutes) proved challenging for most. Many responses included a large number of code-switching and code-mixing incidents. Some linguists, however, distinguish between Code-Mixing referring to the combination of morphology and root words from two different languages (e.g. parkear, which uses an English root word and Spanish morphology) and Code-Switching referring to the movement from one language to another where users use full clauses and switch between two or more languages (Wikipedia, 2022).

Eleven responses were from the *Lees dossier* class (second-year students), and four survey responses were provided by *Film Kunde* class students (fourth-year students). The participants' mother tongues were: English, Papiamentu, Spanish and additional languages that they spoke on a daily basis included Dutch, French, and Jamaican. Their heritage was quite varied for such a small sample group and is representative of the mixed population residing in Curaçao (see figure 5).

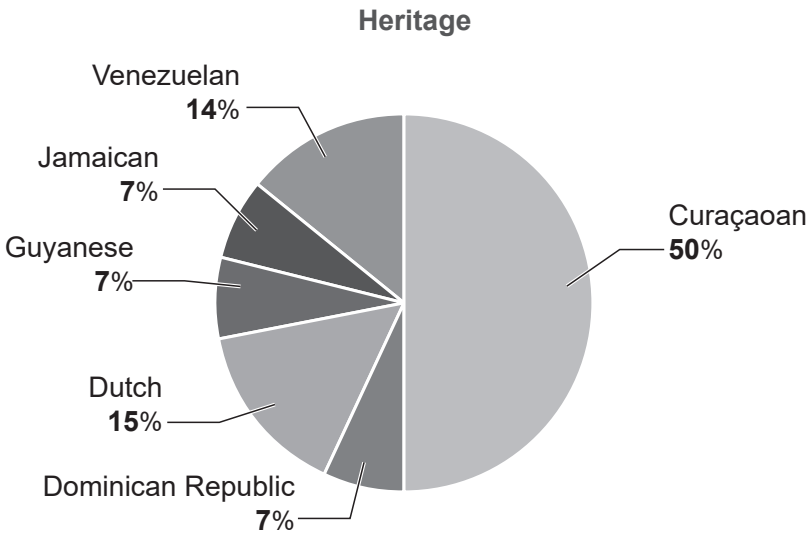

Figure 5: Survey participants' heritage

Responses to a selection of eight survey questions present an image of how students feel about learning and speaking a foreign language, student life and what they imagine their future to be like.

1. Are you embarrassed when you make a mistake using a foreign language?
   46.7% said “Somewhat,” 6.7% said “Very much.”

2. Do you plan to study/work abroad?
   33% are seriously considering it

3. Where and when do you plan to study/work abroad?
   Netherlands, US, Spain

4. What are your future professional goals?
   Get a Master, become a teacher, study more languages

5. What types of jobs do you do?
   Head cashier, sales associate, personal trainer, tutor, administrative assistant, photographer, babysitter.

6. How many hours do you work a week? (See figure 6)

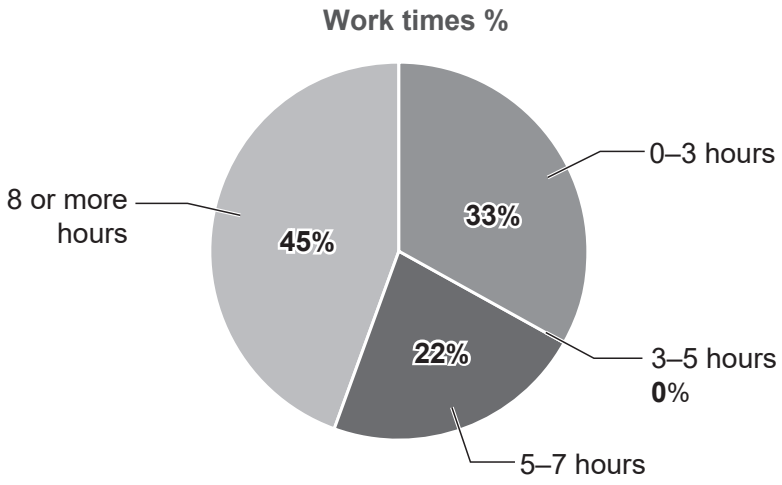

Figure 6: Student part-time work times

7. What is student life like in Curaçao?

Student life according to Chai (pseudonym): "Today I woke up at 6:00 AM and prepared myself to go to my internship (it's nearby the university). I have to be there from 7:15 until 1:15 (it is different for each student). Then from 1:30 until 5:00, I went to follow my classes at the university (sometimes until 7 PM). Then I went home."

Student life according to Maryoli (pseudonym): "In my case, I pay for university myself, so I work and study. It's a challenge doing homework, working, and attending lectures without falling behind."

Student life in one word: "Rush. EXHAUSTING. Hectic. Hard. Complicated. Stress."

8. What cultural aspects of Curaçao make studying there different?

The Caribbean flavor, lovely beaches, most of the locals can speak four languages, university classes are taught in 3–4 languages, it's comforting, it's home.

First-Year Student Group Interview

This was a class interview where I asked questions of the entire group and passed along the recorder so that volunteers could record their responses. This was a first-year class consisting of students of different majors but all were education majors. Though they all speak and understand at least three languages their fluencies varied as per their chosen language focus as a teacher. Therefore, their professor suggested that I ask the question in Papiamentu, Dutch, and English and allow students to answer in whichever language they felt more comfortable using. As most code-switch, common in Curaçaoan multi-lingual speakers, it became necessary for translation and transcription of the audio to be completed simultaneously as software such as Otter.ai was not designed to handle code-switching or multilingualism.

What is daily life like for you at the University of Curaçao?

Student 1: I am a student and a mother. I prepare all my things in the early morning and then head out to school. If I get stuck or don't understand something I ask the professor or other students. After school, I go straight home, but my parents help me with my baby and make sure they are fed and ready when I get home. I pick them up and then I can put them to bed on time. After that, I usually start on my homework.

Student 2: I get up at 6:30 am and my father makes breakfast. I get to school around 8:00 and there's a break at noon. After that I take classes until 17:00 and then head home. Later

in the evening, I and my dad go for a walk/hike and sometimes we take in a spa. I start my homework whenever I get home.

Student 3: I always get up at 5:00 am to get everything ready for school before I leave the house. I work with my mother at the offices of some international fast-food chains (Pizza Hut, Subway, KFC). We start early sometimes. I turn on the systems first and that means I head to school after already having worked some hours. I get to school around 7:30, take my classes, and try to finish all my homework on campus because after classes I go back to work for 2–3 hours and turn off the system. After that, I always go for a walk/hike and then come home to cook and eat dinner. My day ends at 11:00 pm. On weekdays when I don't have classes I work at the office all day.

I see that you all are wide awake and doing your best in class. Good on you!

Student 4: Well, it is a struggle after lunchtime, a REAL struggle to stay energetic but we try really hard.

No coffee?

Student 5: No, no. We use all-natural energy and we push ourselves!

What cultural aspects of Curaçao do you think make studying here different from anywhere else?

Student 6: According to my experience…I work with (Dutch) tourists and they ask me if I go to school and I reply: 'of course.' They ask if we have scholarships or if we have to pay for tuition ourselves. I assume that for them tuition and university are much more expensive. I don't think Curaçao tuition is that high, so in my case, I don't have a scholarship or a government stipend. I pay for everything myself by working and studying. (…) If I had elected to go to the Netherlands to study at university, I probably would have opted for a government stipend because everything is more expensive there. (…)

Student 7: So, we can say that other countries are bigger than Curaçao and the commute to school is much longer. Here on the island, you can get to campus really quickly and back to work after that in a short time, so you can pay for your tuition and all that. In the Netherlands, I imagine students have to travel for at least an hour to get to university and another hour to get back. That's two lost hours! In my case, I get to work in 15 minutes, so this could be an important difference and be one of the things that makes studying in Curaçao special.

You are now first-year students. What are your future professional goals?

Student 8: We discussed this in class earlier today. Do we want to stay in Curaçao or go abroad? Let's think about it some more.

Student 9: This major is part of a four-year program. I don't see myself standing in front of a classroom in four years, but maybe in five. In addition to *Logo* I also want to be a Papiamentu teacher.

Student 10: I will graduate and after a year of working I want to travel the world and learn about other cultures. I made a bucket list and on it is traveling to Japan, Colombia, and the various states in the U.S. I want to see the Northern Lights and snow. I am originally from the island of Aruba but like most Curaçaoans, I have never seen snow. After my travels, I would like to start teaching (…) and maybe return to Aruba, stay here in Curaçao or move to the Netherlands. I don't know yet.

Which foreign language has had the biggest influence on your life?

Student 11: Dutch. Because everything is in Dutch. Here on campus, when I go elsewhere, I have to speak Dutch and to be honest I am not very good at it. But I chose to answer first in Dutch and at work, I also put in extra effort to speak Dutch so I can practice more. As a university student, I expect from myself that I will be able to speak a higher level of Dutch than I had before. For example, last year I went to the Netherlands on a holiday and I was able to speak Dutch very well. Everyone understood me, but I still had that bit of doubt. I want to show people that though I am dark-skinned that doesn't mean I cannot learn and speak foreign languages. No one will talk about me secretly in a different language! I can understand you and argue back. If I were to compare my English to my Dutch abilities, my English is far superior to my Dutch. We can talk professor!

What's the most amazing (or embarrassing) intercultural experience you've had because of speaking another language?

Student 12: English. I don't like it. I can understand and speak it but when I have to write something everything (spelling) changes. I don't like it. I work at WTC (World Trade Center) so I talk to a lot of English speakers. It is fun, but you always have that doubt about whether you made sense when you spoke or not.

Student 13 (only male student after being prompted)**:**

Well, last year I was standing at a bus stop, and four Spanish (-speaking) tourists asked me for directions. I speak three foreign languages: Dutch, Spanish, and

English, but I had let my Spanish slide a bit so they caught me off-guard. I tried to explain and give them directions but after they had left, I realized I had told them to turn left when they were supposed to turn right. I tried to chase them down to tell them, but they had disappeared.

Fourth-year student Interview: Nathaniel (*pseudonym*)

This interview was a zoom interview where I asked questions based on Nathaniel's responses to a class survey. Nathaniel speaks English quite fluently and rarely code-switches.

Tell us something about yourself

I'm a fourth-year student at the University of Curaçao. I am currently in my last year. I'm 20 years old. I finished the HAVO, which in English is secondary school. Afterward, I would like to go to the Netherlands to do my masters in general linguistics because linguistics and phonetics, and phonology and those kinds of topics really interest me. Before that, I actually wanted to become an art teacher. But due to my graduating at 18, at that time, my mother did not want me to go to the Netherlands, so I stayed here to do my second option, which was English. And yeah, I fell in love. So that's why I'm going to do general linguistics afterward.

Daily life as a student at this university, what can you tell us?

The most important thing that you have to know is our school scheduling. Schools here in Curaçao begin at 7:30. In the morning, and especially high schools, they begin at 7:30. And they end around two o'clock in the afternoon. That's why most of our lessons here at the university begin sometimes around one, but they can go on until nine at night. When we start with our internships, we will have to go teach at high school and school begins during the morning. So, you'll be going to the internship from 7:30 until the afternoon, and then you go on to the university to take lectures. There aren't any breaks, so it can be pretty hectic. For example, in your first year, you only teach one lesson and observe classes most of the time. In year two we had to get ready to give 20 lessons. In year three, we had to teach 40 and now in year four, we are teaching 80.

What does that look like schedule-wise?

For example, for myself, it's sometimes difficult to get any transport. So, I give around two to three lessons per day. That's three days a week now at my internship. Basically, per week, I'm going to be teaching around eight lessons. So, I would have to probably go for 10 weeks to finish up.

Tell me more about your group chat initiative on WhatsApp.

We have a group that motivates each other. For example, most of the time, I'm the first one done with most of my subjects. So, I also help my friends and my colleagues, through a study support group. Most of us are a tight-knit group of students. Our faculty is divided into logo, which are the students who are studying to become teachers in elementary school. There's us who are learning to become language teachers. And here on the island languages are taught more specifically focused on high school. There are four groups: Papiamentu, Dutch, Spanish and English teachers. I'm studying to become an English teacher. I remember when I came to school at the beginning of the school year, we were 20. Now we're 12, so we've been whittled down a lot. But we became very tight. So that's how we came up with the group, and we started to motivate each other because sometimes it gets hectic. Some people can keep up and some people don't. It's sometimes a bit sad to see your colleagues as they are really struggling. So, we try to help each other as much as we can.

What cultural aspects of Curaçao do you think make studying here different from anywhere else?

I think just the fact that we are a small island. I don't go to the beach to study but I have a lot of friends and colleagues that find it very soothing to go to the beach or just in nature to study. They grab a book, go to the beach, swim and study then go back home. In addition, I think it's easier to go to sidewalk cafes because it's not rainy and, it's never winter. So, people are more inclined to go out and study with friends. Study groups are very prominent. For example, for two weeks I had a colleague coming to my house because she was doing an internship at the same school. The school was very close by my house. After doing the internship, she would come to my house, we would study and work on the assignments and then from there, we would go together to university lectures. Living on a small island makes it a lot easier to reach your colleagues also.

What about your future professional goals, and your plans?

Okay, so right now, of course, finishing my studies, and then afterward, going to do my general linguistics master's. Afterward, I intend to come back to Curaçao, of course, to work in the educational field here. But I would also love to work at the Exam Bureau to make exams. Before they used to make English exams in the Netherlands, and then ship them here. Right now, I think that most exams are made here in Curaçao, so I would love to work in that department. I am also working on a study gram, which is Instagram meets for studying. I post things regarding English grammar. Hopefully maybe in the future, because I do want to develop more and go

into my creative side, I would love to start a non-profit or something. Something that has to do with a bookstore, where I could make notebooks and pencils, and design them with many beautifully made designs that are prevalent here in Curaçao. We could give them out to students that don't have much money to buy their stuff. Most of the time we go to Bruna bookstores that get shipments from abroad instead of producing things here on the island, which could make them cheaper.

What is the major issue in teaching English as a foreign language as a profession?

Generally, here on the island, teachers are unhappy due to the whole COVID pandemic thing. The government took 12.5% off their salaries. And also, many of the teachers lost their vacations and their bonus. They haven't received them for a few years now. There's going to be a demonstration to talk about the mistreatment, and also to discuss when they're going to get back the 12.5% of their salary. It is fact that most teachers are seriously struggling financially here. It's not like you can get your money like other people that work in other fields. Teachers are working past hours, and they even give extra lessons to gain more money, because the money that they are receiving right now isn't enough. The government can be very shady. Though the Netherlands has sent money to be spent on education here, we don't see the money coming in. Most schools don't have air conditioning and they are still working with chalkboards instead of whiteboards. I think those are the main aspects that concern me at the moment.

Alumni Interview: Loraine (*pseudonym*)

This interview was a face-to-face interview in an office. I asked questions and used both an iPhone and a digital recorder to record her response. Loraine agreed to record two messages for our university students which were both used in a university-wide presentation. As an English teacher, Loraine very rarely code-switched.

Tell me about yourself

I've been here for four years, but my family is in Aruba. So, by the end of this month, they will come and participate in my graduation ceremony which I'm very excited about because I haven't seen them in five to six months. So, I'm excited that we can celebrate my accomplishment together.

And can you tell me one more time about your plans for the future?

Yes, right now, I'm planning to work for one year because next year, I want to go to Holland for my master's. And it's another new place for me a whole different, different culture. From the atmosphere to the weather, everything is different. And I'm not sure if I will find a job immediately. I was advised by one of my friends that when you go you need to adapt first, then you can start looking for a job. So that is why I'm like, "Okay, I have to save before I go to Holland".

And what is your master going to be?

English culture and literature. I also want to have like a plan B just in case in the future I don't want to teach anymore so that I can have something to rely on. And I can do a lot with a master's in Colombia. You can work in the journalism area, you can become an editor. One of my dreams is to write books so that is a way that I can start with it.

So even though you've just graduated, could you tell us a little bit about daily life as a student at this university?

Every student experiences university differently. I have been working for the past three years and so I work and also go to school. My lessons always start at three to five or three to seven, maybe once a week, we might start at one to seven. But most of the time it's from three to five, three to seven. And so, in the morning, I work. So, I work from eight to twelve. Right after work, I come home, eat my lunch, maybe take a small nap, then go to school. And the classes are like two hours. And after that, it depends on what type of student you are, if you're like, a proactive student, come home and you start working on your assignment early on, but I don't really work much at home, I do most of the stuff at school. I try my best to be attentive and because I have to work. I do school work at school so that at home I don't have to do anything, just relaxing.

The real struggle is when you go to an internship in the morning, then you have to rush there, maybe you have like, a space of 30 minutes to eat, then you have to go to class on campus. So, you spend your whole day going from one school to another, from one class to another. So, at the end of the day, you are really exhausted. So, I was literally working from Monday to Saturday, because I have to fill in my work hours in the weekend.

So, you pay for your own school?

No, I got a student loan, but it doesn't cover everything. Like right now I spent 25 guilders a week on transportation to get to work because I have two jobs. For the past five months, I've been working two jobs and also going to school.

Do you mind if I ask what your thesis was?

My thesis was about how your mother tongue affects second language learning. For me, it was personal because my parents are Haitian. I was born in Aruba so I grew up speaking two languages. Then I went to school and had to learn Dutch. Then I was introduced to English and a bit of Spanish because most of my classmates were Dominicans. So, there were a lot of languages and right now it is a struggle for me because there are words that I know in English but I don't know in Papiamentu. It's hard to formulate good sentences because, in your mind, you're constantly translating. "Okay, how do you say this? How do you say that?" That's why I thought this was a good topic.

What's the biggest positive consequence that learning a foreign language or foreign languages has had on your life?

It is the opportunity, the feeling of freedom that you can speak and understand what is going on around you. Because I know how difficult it is when you don't understand the language when you cannot interact with another person. You feel like you're limited. And I've seen it mostly in my parents. They struggle, especially when they want to help us with our formal homework. And you see it in their faces. Sometimes my dad gets like, sad, you see the sadness on his face. There's an opportunity also at church where there's a Jamaican lady that speaks English only. So, for her to follow what is going on, I sometimes translate for her. So, the positive consequence is opportunity.

Do students believe that there's a benefit to watching TV and or watching English language TV to learn English?

My youngest sisters, who speak English better than me, write it properly too. They spend the whole day on TikTok. It's basic, it's just TikTok. They don't have Netflix. So, imagine if they had Netflix, combined with TikTok and Instagram. Their English skills are due to social media and I really believe that watching and listening help with learning a new language.

References

Allecijfers. (2023). *Curaçao in cijfers en grafieken* [Graph]. Allecijfers.nl. https://allecijfers.nl/land/curacao/

Curaçao liqueur. (2023). Curaçao Liqueur [Photo]. https://www.curacaoliqueur.com/

Joubert, S., & Perl, M. (2007). The Portuguese Language on Curaçao and Its Role in the Formation of Papiamentu. Journal of Caribbean Literatures, 5(1), 43–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40986317

Map of the Caribbean. Fabricius, C. (2002). Do rural people really benefit from protected areas—Rhetoric or reality? —Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-Caribbean_fig4_229076648 [accessed 12 Jan, 2023]

Otter.ai (2023). [Computer software]. Otter.ai. https://otter.ai/home

Valies, K. (2021). Papiamentu. Other Language Educators Newsletter (94.3, 3–7).

Van Buurt, G., & Joubert, S. (1997). Stemmen uit het Verleden, Indiaanse Woorden in het Papiamentu. Alphen aan den Rijn: Haasbeek.

Waldron, L. (2021). "Chapter 5 The Strings Attached". [Image]. In Visual Culture and Indigenous Agency in the Early Americas. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004468108_006

Wikipedia contributors. (2022, December 6). Code-mixing. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 06:17, January 8, 2023, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Code-mixing&oldid=1125842324

Wladimir Balentien. [Photo]. In Wikipedia. Retrieved January 8, 2023 from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/31/20140713_Wladimir_Ramon_Balentien%2C_outfielder_of_the_Tokyo_Yakult_Swallows%2C_at_Meiji_Jingu_Stadium.JPG CC BY-SA 4.0