

# RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

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

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program  
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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# Language Group Specific

## Informational Report: Bassa

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# Language History

- Bassa is an Anglophone language belonging to the Niger-Congo family that has existed since around 500B.C. (Swan, 2001).
- It is spoken in Liberia by over 350,000 and Sierra Leone by about 7,000 people.
- Bassa is the second largest indigenous language spoken in Liberia.
- There are three regional dialects of this language.
- If not careful, one can confuse Bassa with other languages found in other parts of Africa, such as Basa (Nigeria) and Basaa (Cameroon) (Horace, 2010).



(no author, [www.worldatlas.com](http://www.worldatlas.com), 2011)

# Bassa- Vah Script



- The Bassa Vah script was originally created by a Bassa man, Dee Wahdayn. Legend says that he would write words on leaves with his teeth, instead of his hand. The words were thrown from his mouth to the leaf, hence the word “Vah”, which means “to throw a word” (Early, 2011).
- The script was brought to the Western world in an attempt to revive the language around 1920 by Dr. Thomas Narvan Lewis, a Bassa physician (Horace, 2010).
- Currently, Bassa is considered to be a dying language due to the fact that most people can speak it, but the only ones who can write in it are elder men.

	a	ɔ	o	u	e	ɛ	i
high							
grave							
mid-low							
drag							
double							

- The Bassa language is a tonal language, meaning words with the same pronunciation but spoken in different pitches are considered to be different words altogether.
- The script is made up of 7 vowels and five tones, giving the language 35 vowel sounds. The tones are marked with a system of dots and dashes inside vowel letters (Alger, 1998).
- Bassa is also syllable timed, meaning that each syllable gets the same amount of time when spoken (Swan, 2001).

(Alger, [www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm), 1998)

# Bassa-Vah Script

ㄩㄩ	ㄋ^	ㄗ	ㄝ	ㄩㄩ	ㄐ	ㄑ	ㄒ	ㄓ	ㄔ
ehni n	kah k	say s	fah f	mbe mb	yeeay j, ɲ	gah g	dii d	kpah kp	jauh j
ㄌ	ㄍ	ㄗ	ㄌ	ㄍ	ㄗ	ㄍ	ㄌ	ㄍ	ㄌ
whah hw/xw	wah w	zau z	gbu gb	udau "d	chay c	uwuu hw	tau t	bah b	vu v
ㄏ	ㄆ	ㄌ	ㄋ	ㄌ	ㄐ	ㄑ	ㄒ	ㄓ	ㄔ
yaayin h	pah p	uwada rl	ah a	auh ɔ	oh o	uuh u	aay e	eh ɛ	iih i

There are 23 consonants in the Bassa-Vah script. Click [here](#) to listen to a sample of Bassa spoken, and click [here](#) to view a sample of Bassa-Vah script (Alger, 1998).

(Alger, [www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm), 1998)

# Phonological Errors



- Because Bassa is a tonal language, learning English can be difficult, as these students are not used to applying tone to the whole utterance and varying it for the sake of emphasis. When trying to speak, their English has a “jerkyness” to it , with no variation on emphasis and no pattern in intonation.
- It is also difficult when an African name with its fixed intonation has to be worked into an English sentence.
- Being a syllable-timed language, English may be hard for someone who speaks Bassa to understand because they are used to giving equal attention to each syllable. For example, the words in the phrase “I did it” can be stressed to slightly change the meaning of the phrase (Ex. “I **did** it” vs. “**I** did it”).

(Swan, 2001)

# Phonological Errors (cont.)

- The vowel system in the Bassa script is different from English in that it has fewer vowel sounds. Difficulty could arise when someone speaking Bassa tries to learn more vowel sounds than he or she is used to.
- In the English language, vowel sounds are weakened in unstressed syllables of a word. Speakers of Bassa are not used to this and may pronounce the English word just as it is spelt. Ex. “policemen” & “policeman”
- Consonant difficulty can also arise in that Bassa does not have as many final consonants and consonant clusters as the English language. Students may devoice voiced final consonants. Ex. “write” for “ride”

(Swan, 2001)

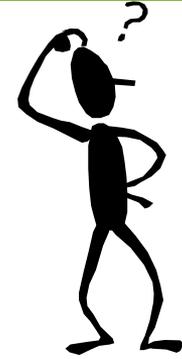
# Difficulty in Syntax



- Bassa students learning English may overuse the word “must” instead of “have to”. Ex. “I can’t go as I must take an exam”.
- The present progressive may be overused. Ex “I was having no money”.
- There may be mix-ups in the use of singular and plural nouns. Nouns that follow an irregular pattern will need to be pointed out as well. Ex. “We had a rain last night”.

(Swan, 2001)

# Semantic & Pragmatic Difficulty



- People who speak Bassa and other West African languages are attracted to English proverbs and sayings because they correspond to the way they would explain events and life lessons. Unfortunately, they may not grasp the full meaning of these sayings.  
(Swan, 2001)
- The different colors of the rainbow may pose a problem to those who speak Bassa. In the Bassa language, there are only two colors used to describe something, **ziza** (yellow, orange, green) or **hui** (purple, green, blue). Extra practice with the various colors of the rainbow should be utilized.  
(Brennus, 2004)

# Cultural Considerations

- Students who speak Bassa may have difficulty getting their point across due to the fact that their culture values taking a long time to describe something, rather than getting right to the point.

([www.culturecrossing.net](http://www.culturecrossing.net))

- There are forms of West African English and Liberian English that are most likely utilized by students speaking Bassa and learning English. This needs to be considered and carefully handled as “Liberian English” has become almost it’s own language.

# Communication Style

- Nonverbal communication is quite apparent, with body language and gestures playing a large role (Dunn-Marcos, 2005)
- It is not uncommon to keep an arms-length or less of personal space between two people, and placement of the hand on the shoulder when standing or on the leg when sitting is acceptable.
- When greeting someone in an informal setting, it is necessary to shake hands with a light “finger snap”. Formal introductions require a formal handshake.



([www.culturecrossing.net](http://www.culturecrossing.net))



# Communication

- Maintaining eye contact is a sign of respect when interacting with someone close in age. However, children are not allowed to look an elder in the eye, especially when being reprimanded, as it is viewed as a sign of defiance. This differs greatly from the way Americans view eye contact.
- In everyday interaction, it is considered rude to wag the index finger for someone to come closer. Instead, one must gesture with all four fingers for someone to come.

([www.culturecrossing.net](http://www.culturecrossing.net))

# Communication

- In common communication, many of those speaking Bassa from Liberia or any West African language have no problem saying what they mean, even if it may seem to offend others. It is not meant in malice, but to be truthful in how one feels.
- Since “weight” carries no stigma, many from Liberia refer to others in English as “the fat one”. This is not meant to offend others.
- Other adjectives and descriptions commonly used, but often viewed as offensive, are calling someone “old” or referring to their skin color.
- Bluntness and honesty are present in discussion, which usually takes many words to convey, often laden with stories and folktales.

(Dunn-Marcos, 2005)

# Resources

## Books

- Dunn-Marcos, R., Kolleylan, K., Ngovo, B., & Russ, E. (2005). *Liberians: An introduction to their history and culture*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Swan, M. & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

## Internet Sites

- Alger, S. (1998). Bassa. *Omniglot: Writing systems and languages of the world*. Retrieved from: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm>
- Brennus. (Dec. 2004). Colors and language. [Msg. 1] Message posted to: <http://www.antimoon.com/forum/2005/6179.htm>
- Cultural Crossing: A community built guide to cross-cultural etiquette and understanding. (n.d.) Retrieved from: [http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student.php?id=117](http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student.php?id=117)

# Resources (cont.)

Early, P. (2011, January). A dying Liberian language:

The Bassa Va-Chede. Retrieved from:

<http://www.1847post.com/article/dying-liberian-language-bassa-va-chede>

Horace, J. (2010). *The Bassa language*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.uniboa.org/bassalanguage.html>

## Map & Video

World Atlas. (2011). Map of Liberia [Graphic Map].

Retrieved from: [www.worldatlas.com](http://www.worldatlas.com)

World Language Movies. (2010, Dec.). Words of life Bassa: Central Bassa people/ language movie trailer [Video File]. Retrieved from:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHPHhXDNFy0>

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