Other People's Children

Cultural Conflict in the Classroom

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A brand-new black teacher is delivering her first reading lesson to a group of first-grade students in inner-city Philadelphia. She has almost memorized the entire basal-provided lesson dialogue while practicing in front of a mirror the night before.

"Good morning, boys and girls. Today we're going to read a story about where we live, in the city."

A small brown hand rises.

"Yes, Marti."

Marti and this teacher are special friends, for she was a kindergartner in the classroom where her new teacher student-taught.

"Teacher, how come you talkin' like a white person? You talkin' just like my momma talk when she get on the phone!"

I was that first-year teacher many years ago, and Marti was among the first to teach me the role of language diversity in the classroom. Marti let me know that children, even young children, are often aware of the different codes we all use in our everyday lives. They may not yet have learned how to produce those codes or what social purposes they serve, but children often have a remarkable ability to discern and identify different codes in different settings. It is this sensitivity to language and its appropriate use upon which we must build to ensure the success of children from diverse backgrounds.

One aspect of language diversity in the classroom—form (the code of a language, its phonology, grammar, inflections, sentence structure, and written symbols)—has usually received
the most attention from educators, as manifested in their concern about the "nonstandardness" of the code their students speak. While form is important, particularly in the context of social success, it is considerably less important when concern is lodged instead in the area of cognitive development. This area is related to that aspect of language diversity reflected in Marti’s statement — language use — the socially and cognitively based linguistic determinations speakers make about style, register, vocabulary, and so forth, when they attempt to interact with or achieve particular goals within their environments. It is the purpose of this paper to address a broad conception of language diversity as it affects the learning environments of linguistically diverse students; it focuses on the development of the range of linguistic alternatives that students have at their disposal for use in varying settings.

**Acquiring One Language Variety and Learning Another**

The acquisition and development of one’s native language is a wondrous process, drawing upon all of the cognitive and affective capacities that make us human. By contrast, the successful acquisition of a second form of a language is essentially a rote-learning process brought to automaticity. It is, however, a process in which success is heavily influenced by highly charged affective factors. Because of the frequency with which schools focus unsuccessfully on changing language form, a careful discussion of the topic and its attendant affective aspects is in order.

**The Affective Filter in Language Learning**

Learning to orally produce an alternate form is not principally a function of cognitive analysis, thereby not ideally learned from protracted rule-based instruction and correction. Rather, it comes with exposure, comfort level, motivation, familiarity, and practice in real communicative contexts. Those who have enjoyed a pleasant interlude in an area where
another dialect of English is spoken may have noticed a change in their own speech. Almost unconsciously, their speech has approached that of those native to the area. The evidence suggests that had these learners been corrected or drilled in the rules of the new dialect, they probably would not have acquired it as readily.

Stephen Krashen, in his work on second-language acquisition, distinguishes the processes of conscious learning (rule-based instruction leading to the monitoring of verbal output) from unconscious acquisition ("picking up" a language through internalizing the linguistic input-derived immersion in a new context — what happens, say, when the North American enjoys a visit to the Caribbean). Krashen found unconscious acquisition to be much more effective. In further studies, however, he found that in some cases people did not easily "acquire" the new language. This finding led him to postulate the existence of what he called the "affective filter." The filter operates "when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the second language, or is overanxious about his performance,...[causing] a mental block....[which] will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition." Although the process of learning a new dialect cannot be completely equated with learning a new language, some processes seem to be similar. In this case, it seems that the less stress attached to the process, the more easily it is accomplished.

The so-called affective filter is likely to be raised when the learner is exposed to constant correction. Such correction increases cognitive monitoring of speech, thereby making talking difficult. To illustrate with an experiment anyone can try, I have frequently taught a relatively simple new "dialect" in my work with preservice teachers. In this dialect, the phonetic element "iz" is added after the first consonant or consonant cluster in each syllable of a word. (Teacher becomes tiz-eachiz-er and apple, iz-ap-piz-le.) After a bit of drill and practice, the students are asked to tell a partner why they decided to
become teachers. Most only haltingly attempt a few words before lapsing into either silence or into “Standard English,” usually to complain about my circling the room to insist that all words they utter be in the new dialect. During a follow-up discussion, all students invariably speak of the impossibility of attempting to apply rules while trying to formulate and express a thought. Forcing speakers to monitor their language for rules while speaking, typically produces silence.

Correction may also affect students’ attitudes toward their teachers. In a recent research project, middle-school, inner-city students were interviewed about their attitudes toward their teachers and school. One young woman complained bitterly, “Mrs. ——— always be interrupting to make you ‘talk correct’ and stuff. She be butting into your conversations when you not even talking to her! She need to mind her own business.”

In another example from a Mississippi preschool, a teacher had been drilling her three- and four-year-old charges on responding to the greeting, “Good morning, how are you?” with “I’m fine, thank you.” Posting herself near the door one morning, she greeted a four-year-old black boy in an interchange that went something like this:

**Teacher:** Good morning, Tony, how are you?

**Tony:** I be’s fine.

**Teacher:** Tony, I said, How *are* you?

**Tony:** (with raised voice) I be’s fine.

**Teacher:** No, Tony, I said how *are* you?

**Tony:** (angrily) I done told you I be’s fine and I ain’t telling you no more!

Tony must have questioned his teacher’s intelligence, if not sanity. In any event, neither of the students discussed above would be predisposed, as Krashen says, to identify with their teachers and thereby increase the possibility of unconsciously acquiring the latter’s language form.
Ethnic Identity and Language Performance

Issues of group identity may also affect students' oral production of a different dialect. Nelson-Barber, in a study of phonologic aspects of Pima Indian language found that, in grades 1–3, the children's English most approximated the standard dialect of their teachers. But surprisingly, by fourth grade, when one might assume growing competence in standard forms, their language moved significantly toward the local dialect. These fourth graders had the competence to express themselves in a more standard form, but chose, consciously or unconsciously, to use the language of those in their local environments. The researcher believes that, by ages 8–9, these children became aware of their group membership and its importance to their well-being, and this realization was reflected in their language. They may also have become increasingly aware of the school's negative attitude toward their community and found it necessary — through choice of linguistic form — to decide with which camp to identify.

A similar example of linguistic performance (what one does with language) belies linguistic competence (what one is capable of doing) comes from researcher Gerald Mohatt (personal communication), who was at the time teaching on a Sioux reservation. It was considered axiomatic among the reservation staff that the reason these students failed to become competent readers was that they spoke a nonstandard dialect. One day Mohatt happened to look, unnoticed, into a classroom where a group of boys had congregated. Much to his surprise and amusement, the youngsters were staging a perfect rendition of his own teaching, complete with stance, walk, gestures, and Standard English (including Midwestern accent). Clearly, the school's failure to teach these children to read was based on factors other than their inability to speak and understand Standard English. They could do both; they did not often choose to do so in a classroom setting, however, possibly because they chose to identify with their community rather than with the school.
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Appreciating Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom

What should teachers do about helping students acquire an additional oral form? First, they should recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity. To suggest that this form is “wrong” or, even worse, ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family. On the other hand, it is equally important to understand that students who do not have access to the politically popular dialect form in this country, that is, Standard English, are less likely to succeed economically than their peers who do. How can both realities be embraced?

Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context. Some teachers accomplish this goal by having groups of students create bidialectal dictionaries of their own language form and Standard English. Others have had students become involved with standard forms through various kinds of role-play. For example, memorizing parts for drama productions will allow students to “get the feel” of speaking Standard English while not under the threat of correction. Young students can create puppet shows or role-play cartoon characters. (Many “superheroes” speak almost hypercorrect Standard English!) Playing a role eliminates the possibility of implying that the child’s language is inadequate, and suggests, instead, that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts. Some other teachers in New York City have had their students produce a news show every day for the rest of the school. The students take on the persona of some famous newscaster, keeping in character as they develop and read their news reports. Discussions ensue about whether Walter Cronkite would have said it that way, again taking the focus off the child’s speech.
Activities for Promoting Linguistic Pluralism

It is possible and desirable to make the actual study of language diversity a part of the curriculum for all students. For younger children, discussions about the differences in the ways television characters from different cultural groups speak can provide a starting point. A collection of the many children's books written in the dialects of various cultural groups can also provide a wonderful basis for learning about linguistic diversity, as can audiotaped stories narrated by individuals from different cultures. Mrs. Pat, a teacher chronicled by Shirley Brice Heath, had her students become language "detectives," interviewing a variety of individuals and listening to the radio and television to discover the differences and similarities in the ways people talked. Children can learn that there are many ways of saying the same thing, and that certain contexts suggest particular kinds of linguistic performances.

Inevitably, each speaker will make his or her own decision about the appropriate form to use in any context. Neither teachers nor anyone else will be able to force a choice upon an individual. All we can do is provide students with the exposure to an alternate form, and allow them the opportunity to practice that form in contexts that are nonthreatening, have a real purpose, and are intrinsically enjoyable. If they have access to alternative forms, it will be their decision later in life to choose which to use. We can only provide them with the knowledge base and hope they will make appropriate choices.

Ethnic Identity and Styles of Discourse

Thus far, we have primarily discussed differences in grammar and syntax. There are other differences in oral language of which teachers should be aware in a multicultural context, particularly in discourse style and language use. Michaels and
other researchers identified differences in children’s narratives at “sharing time.” They found that there was a tendency among young white children to tell “topic-centered” narratives – stories focused on one event – and a tendency among black youngsters, especially girls, to tell “episodic” narratives – stories that include shifting scenes and are typically longer. While these differences are interesting in themselves, what is of greater significance is adults’ responses to the differences. Cazden reports on a subsequent project in which a white adult was taped reading the oral narratives of black and white first graders, with all syntax dialectal markers removed. Adults were asked to listen to the stories and comment about the children’s likelihood of success in school. The researchers were surprised by the differential responses given by black and white adults.

In responding to the retelling of a black child’s story, the white adults were uniformly negative, making such comments as “terrible story, incoherent” and “[n]ot a story at all in the sense of describing something that happened.” Asked to judge this child’s academic competence, all of the white adults rated her below the children who told “topic-centered” stories. Most of these adults also predicted difficulties for this child’s future school career, such as, “This child might have trouble reading,” that she exhibited “language problems that affect school achievement,” and that “family problems” or “emotional problems” might hamper her academic progress.

The black adults had very different reactions. They found this child’s story “well formed, easy to understand, and interesting, with lots of detail and description.” Even though all five of these adults mentioned the “shifts” and “associations” or “nonlinear” quality of the story, they did not find these features distracting. Three of the black adults selected the story as the best of the five they had heard, and all but one judged the child as exceptionally bright, highly verbal, and successful in school.

When differences in narrative style produce differences in interpretation of competence, the pedagogical implications are evident. If children who produce stories based in differing
discourse styles are expected to have trouble reading, and viewed as having language, family, or emotional problems, as was the case with the informants quoted by Cazden, they are unlikely to be viewed as ready for the same challenging instruction awarded students whose language patterns more closely parallel the teacher’s. It is important to emphasize that those teachers in the Cazden study who were of the same cultural group as the students recognized the differences in style, but did not assign a negative valence to those differences. Thus, if teachers hope to avoid negatively stereotyping the language patterns of their students, it is important that they be encouraged to interact with, and willingly learn from, knowledgeable members of their students’ cultural groups. This can perhaps best become a reality if teacher education programs include diverse parents, community members, and faculty among those who prepare future teachers, and take seriously the need to develop in those teachers the humility required for learning from the surrounding context when entering a culturally different setting.

**Questioning Styles**

Heath has identified another aspect of diversity in language use which affects classroom instruction and learning. She found that questions were used differently in a southeastern town by young black students and their teachers. The students were unaccustomed to responding to the “known-answer” test questions of the classroom. (The classic example of such questions is the contrast between the real-life questioning routine: “What time is it?” “Two o’clock.” “Thanks.” and the school questioning routine: “What time is it?” “Two o’clock.” “Right!”) These students would lapse into silence or contribute very little information when teachers asked direct factual questions which called for feedback of what had just been taught. She found that when the types of questions asked of the children were more in line with the kinds of questions posed to them in their home settings — questions probing the students’ own analyses and evaluations — these
children responded very differently. They “talked, actively and aggressively became involved in the lesson, and offered useful information about their past experiences.” The author concludes not only that these kinds of questions are appropriate for all children rather than just for the “high groups” with which they have typically been used, but that awareness and use of the kinds of language used in children’s communities can foster the kind of language and performance and growth sought by the school and teachers.

*Oral Styles in Community Life*

I would be remiss to end this section without remarking upon the need to draw upon the considerable language strengths of linguistically diverse populations. Smitherman and many others have made note of the value placed upon oral expression in most African-American communities. The “man (person) of words,” be he or she preacher, poet, philosopher, huckster, or rap song creator, receives the highest form of respect in the black community. The verbal adroitness, the cogent and quick wit, the brilliant use of metaphorical language, the facility in rhythm and rhyme, evident in the language of preacher Martin Luther King, Jr., boxer Muhammad Ali, comedienne Whoopi Goldberg, rapper L. L. Cool J., singer and songwriter Billie Holiday, and many inner-city black students, may all be drawn upon to facilitate school learning.

Other children, as well, come to school with a wealth of specialized linguistic knowledge. Native American children, for example, come from communities with very sophisticated knowledge about storytelling, and a special way of saying a great deal with a few words. Classroom learning should be structured so that not only are these children able to acquire the verbal patterns they lack, but they are also able to strengthen their proficiencies, and to share these with classmates and teachers. We will then all be enriched.
THE DEMANDS OF SCHOOL LANGUAGE—
ORALITY AND LITERACY

There is little evidence that speaking another dialectal form per se, negatively affects one’s ability to learn to read. For commonsensical proof, one need only reflect on nonstandard-dialect-speaking slaves who not only taught themselves to read, but did so under threat of severe punishment or death. But children who speak nonmainstream varieties of English do have a more difficult time becoming proficient readers. Why?

One explanation is that, where teachers’ assessments of competence are influenced by the dialect children speak, teachers may develop low expectations for certain students and subsequently teach them less. A second explanation, which lends itself more readily to observation, rests in teachers’ confusing the teaching of reading with the teaching of a new dialect form.

Cunningham found that teachers across the United States were more likely to correct reading miscues that were dialect related (“Here go a table” for “Here is a table”) than those that were nondialect related (“Here is the dog” for “There is the dog”). Seventy-eight percent of the dialect miscues were corrected, compared with only 27 percent of the nondialect miscues. He concludes that the teachers were acting out of ignorance, not realizing that “here go” and “here is” represent the same meaning in some black children’s language.

In my observations of many classrooms, however, I have come to conclude that even when teachers recognize the similarity of meaning, they are likely to correct dialect-related miscues. Consider a typical example:

TEXT: Yesterday I washed my brother’s clothes.

STUDENT’S RENDITION: Yesterday I wash my bruver close.

The subsequent exchange between student and teacher sounds something like this:
T: Wait, let's go back. What's that word again? [Points at *washed*.]

S: Wash.

T: No. Look at it again. What letters do you see at the end? You see "c-d." Do you remember what we say when we see those letters on the end of a word?

S: "ed"

T: OK, but in this case we say *washed*. Can you say that?

S: Washed.

T: Good. Now read it again.

S: Yesterday I washed my bruvver...

T: Wait a minute, what's that word again? [Points to *brother*.]

S: Bruvver.

T: No. Look at these letters in the middle. [Points to *tb*.] Remember to read what you see. Do you remember how we say that sound? Put your tongue between your teeth and say *tb*/...

The lesson continues in such a fashion, the teacher proceeding to correct the student's dialect-influenced pronunciations and grammar while ignoring the fact that the student had to have comprehended the sentence in order to translate it into her own dialect. Such instruction occurs daily and blocks reading development in a number of ways. First, because children become better readers by having the opportunity to read, the overcorrection exhibited in this lesson means that this child will be less likely to become a fluent reader than other children who are not interrupted so consistently. Second, a complete focus on code and pronunciation blocks children's understanding that reading is essentially a meaning-making process. This child, who understands the text, is led to believe that she is doing something wrong. She is encouraged to think of reading not as something you do to get a message, but something you pronounce. Third, constant corrections by the teacher are likely to cause this student and others like her to resist reading and to resent the teacher.

Robert Berdan reports that, after observing the kind of
teaching routine described above in a number of settings, he incorporated the teacher behaviors into a reading instruction exercise that he used with students in a college class. He put together sundry rules from a number of American social and regional dialects to create what he called the “language of Atlantis.” Students were then called upon to read aloud in this dialect they did not know. When they made errors he interrupted them, using some of the same statements/comments he had heard elementary school teachers routinely make to their students. He concludes:

The results were rather shocking. By the time these Ph.D. candidates in English or linguistics had read 10–20 words, I could make them sound totally illiterate. By using the routines that teachers use of dialectally different students, I could produce all of the behaviors we observe in children who do not learn to read successfully. The first thing that goes is sentence intonation: they sound like they are reading a list from the telephone book. Comment on their pronunciation a bit more, and they begin to subvocalize, rehearsing pronunciations for themselves before they dare to say them out loud. They begin to guess at pronunciations....They switch letters around for no reason. They stumble; they repeat. In short, when I attack them for their failure to conform to my demands for Atlantis English pronunciations, they sound very much like the worst of the second graders in any of the classrooms I have observed.

They also begin to fidget. They wad up their papers, bite their fingernails, whisper, and some finally refuse to continue. They do all the things that children do while they are busily failing to learn to read. Emotional trauma can result as well. For instance, once while conducting this little experiment, in a matter of seconds I actually had one of my graduate students in tears.¹⁸

The moral of this story is not to confuse dialect intervention with reading instruction. To do so will only confuse the child, leading her away from those intuitive understandings about language that will promote reading development, and toward a school career of resistance and a lifetime of avoiding reading. For those who believe that the child has to “say it right in order to spell it right,” let me add that English is not a phonetically regular language. There is no particular difference between telling a child, “You may say /bru:ver/,
but it’s spelled b-r-o-t-b-e-r,” and “You say /com/, but it’s spelled c-o-m-b.”

For this and other reasons, writing may be an arena in which to address standard forms. Unlike unplanned oral language or public reading, writing lends itself to editing. While conversational talk is spontaneous and must be responsive to an immediate context, writing is a mediated process which may be written and rewritten any number of times before being introduced to public scrutiny. Consequently, writing is amenable to rule application – one may first write freely to get one’s thoughts down, and then edit to hone the message and apply specific spelling, syntactical, or punctuation rules. My college students who had such difficulty talking in the “iz” dialect, found writing it, with the rules displayed before them, a relatively easy task.

**Styles of Literacy**

There are other culturally based differences in language use in writing as well. In a seminal article arguing for the existence of “contrastive rhetoric,” Robert Kaplan proposes that different languages have different rhetorical norms, representing different ways of organizing ideas.¹⁹

Such style differences have also been identified in public school classrooms. Gail Martin, a teacher-researcher in Wyoming, wrote about her work with Arapaho students:

One of our major concerns was that many of the stories children wrote didn’t seem to “go anywhere.” The stories just ambled along with no definite start or finish, no climaxes or conclusions. I decided to ask Pius Moss [the school elder] about these stories, since he is a master Arapaho storyteller himself. I learned about a distinctive difference between Arapaho stories and stories I was accustomed to hearing, reading, and telling. Pius Moss explained that Arapaho stories are not written down, they’re told in what we might call serial form, continued night after night. A “good” story is one that lasts seven nights....

When I asked Pius Moss why Arapaho stories never seem to have an “ending,” he answered that there is no ending to life, and stories are about Arapaho life, so there is no need for a conclusion. My col-
leagues and I talked about what Pius had said, and we decided that we would encourage our students to choose whichever type of story they wished to write: we would try to listen and read in appropriate ways.  

Similarly, Native Alaskan teacher Martha Demientieff has discovered that her students find “book language” baffling. To help them gain access to this unfamiliar use of language, she contrasts the “wordy,” academic way of saying things with the metaphorlic style of Athabaskan. The students discuss how book language always uses more words, but how in Heritage language, brevity is always best. Students then work in pairs, groups, or individually to write papers in the academic way, discussing with Martha and with each other whether they believe they have said enough to “sound like a book.” Next they take those papers and try to reduce the meaning to a few sentences. Finally, students further reduce the message to a “saying” brief enough to go on the front of a T-shirt, and the sayings are put on little paper tee shirts that the students cut out and hang throughout the room. Sometimes the students reduce other authors’ wordy texts to their essential meanings as well. Thus, through winding back and forth through orality and literacy, the students begin to understand the stylistic differences between their own language and that of standard text.

**Functions of Print**

Print may serve different functions in some communities than it does in others, and some children may be unaccustomed to using print or seeing it used in the ways that schools demand. Shirley Brice Heath, for example, found that the black children in the community she called Trackton engaged with print as a group activity for specific real-life purposes, such as reading food labels when shopping, reading fix-it books to repair or modify toys, reading the names of cars to identify a wished-for model, or reading to participate in church. There was seldom a time anyone in the community would read as a solitary recreational activity; indeed, anyone who did so was thought to be a little strange.