CHAPTER 3

No Kinda Sense

LISA DELPIT

When LISA DELPIT's eleven-year-old daughter, Maya, transfers to a school where most of the students are African American, her self-esteem soars. She also transfers from Standard English to African American English. Even while struggling to understand her own emotional response to Maya's newly acquired language form, the author is amazed at how quickly her daughter picks it up. She realizes that her daughter is learning it from friends who welcome her as brilliant and beautiful—"part of the club." She concludes that if schools are to be as successful at teaching Standard English, they must be just as welcoming—of the children, of their lives, and of the worlds that interest them. As an example, she argues that if girls are interested in hair, that is an opportunity for teachers to validate that preoccupation and use it as a many-faceted topic for building academic skills and adding Standard English to their students' language repertoire.

"*She be all like,* 'What ch'all talkin' 'bout?' like she ain't had no kinda sense."

When I heard these words spoken by my eleven-year-old daughter it seemed as though a hundred conflicting scripts raced through my mind all at the same time.

My mother to her ten-year-old daughter: "Lisa, would you please speak correctly? Don't sound so ignorant!"

Me to a group of teachers a few decades later: "All people have the right to their own language. We cannot constantly correct children and expect them to continue to want to talk like us."

Me, arguing a point with my sister, the English teacher: "Okay, the bottom line is, if you had to choose, which would you rather your children be able to say, 'I be rich' or 'I am poor' "?

My sister's response, with no hesitation: "I am poor!"

I find myself back to the present saying, "Maya, would you please speak to me in a language I can understand!" She responds, grimacing, "Aw, mom!" And, pulling her mouth into a primly taut circle, she goes through what she said to me again, this time enunciating with exaggerated, overly precise diction, "She said, 'What are you people speaking about,' as if she didn't have any sense."

I've carried that interchange, and others like it, around with me daily as I work in schools and other educational settings. What was my response about?

There was at once a horror at the words emanating from my

daughter's mouth, and a sense of immense shame at feeling that horror. What was it about her language that evoked such a strong response?

Maya is a middle-class, African American child whose mother is a university professor. Her first language, her mother tongue, is standard American English. This is the language she learned at home and the language she used in the predominantly White schools she attended until fifth grade. Certainly she was exposed to, and used, casual forms of what has been referred to as Black English or Ebonics, which is typical in "M-m-m g-i-r-r-r-l, that sweet potato pie is smokin'! I don't know how you do it, but that pie is callin' my name!"

When Maya was in the middle of the fifth grade, I became concerned with her emotional state in a small, predominantly White private school. Although the instruction was excellent, she seemed to be sinking into some sort of emotional abyss. Although her class had several African American boys, she was the only African American girl. She was often excluded by the other girls. She began to say things like, "Maybe if I were prettier I'd have more friends." When she approached me one day and requested that she be allowed to get plastic surgery because her lips were "too big," I knew I had to act. She transferred midyear to a new start-up public charter school with a population of about 98 percent African American children.

As she developed new friends, her self-esteem soared and once more she became the funny, creative, self-assured kid I recognized. But she also acquired new speech codes. And while my head looked on in awe at how my child could so magically acquire a second language form, at how brilliant her mind was to be able to adapt so readily to new circumstances, my heart lurched at some unexamined fear because she had done so.

As I sought to examine my reaction, I realized there were two questions lurking in my consciousness. The first, why did I react with such heart-pounding emotion to my daughter's words? The second, if it was that easy for my child to "pick up" at school a new language clearly not her home language, then what was preventing the millions of African American children whose home language was different from the school's from acquiring the dialect of Standard English? In attempting to answer the first, I gained insight into the second.

Initially, I wondered if I had been infected by that collective shame we African Americans have internalized about our very beings. Having come of age in a racist society, we double-think every aspect of our beings—are we good enough to be accepted by the white world? If it feels right, then it must be wrong. We have to change our natural selves to just be adequate. I used to think that our biggest communal shame was our hair. We have spent millions of hours and tens of millions of dollars to acquire the "swing hair" that white American society says is beautiful. I remember when I returned home from my first year of college with an Afro and discovered that my mother, who remained publicly stalwart through most of the tragedies of her life, was overcome by tears in restaurants, gas stations, and drug stores over what her daughter "had done to herself." From discussions with friends, that story is in no way unique in our collective history. When the Oakland School Board gave birth to the "Ebonics debate" in 1996, I realized that language might be an even greater source of collective disgrace.

Although the purpose of the now infamous Oakland Policy was to allow teachers to gain enough knowledge about the home language of children to respect it and learn to use it to build knowledge of "standard English," African Americans in all walks of life were incensed. How dare anyone suggest that that ignorant-sounding trash was "our language," that we couldn't learn to speak properly? Do they think we're all stupid? From Kweisi Mfume, head of the NAACP, to Rev. Jesse Jackson to Maya Angelou, all expressed to sensation-crazed reporters—with no knowledge of the real policy—that what Oakland was doing was a terrible, grievous mistake. Maya Angelou spoke with quiet intensity, "I am incensed. The very idea that African American language is a language separate and apart can be very threatening because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English." Jesse Jack-

son fired out with his customary passionate oratory, "You don't have to go to school to learn to talk garbage."*

As the media created a mounting furor, never were African American linguistic experts consulted. For that matter, neither were the teachers who were implementing the program. Aileen Moffitt, a white teacher trained in the Standard English Proficiency Program (on which the Oakland policy was based), posted an open letter on the Internet in 1997 [members.tripod.com] in which she praised the effect of the program on her students' achievement and on her own teaching. Never was this kind of information brought to the general public. The black radio stations had a field day. One parodied the televised advertisements for a mail order reading program by presenting fictional endorsements by several characters, including a white cab driver, "Hooked on Ebonics worked for me! Since I got dat stuff, I ain't had nobody stealin' mah money no more!" And another from a professional basketball player: "Hooked on Ebonics worked for me! Ah plays basketball and ah makes millions of dollars. If you gets Hooked on Ebonics, you can be a millionaire, too, jes' like me!" One group, "Atlanta's Black Professionals," managed to get a full-page ad in the *New York Times* (October 9, 1998), without paying a penny. The ad depicts a black man in an overcoat with his back facing the reader, but clearly intended to resemble Dr. Martin Luther King. The headline, "I HAS A DREAM" is written over the image. Below the picture are two paragraphs of small print, with the words, "SPEAK OUT AGAINST EBONICS" printed in large type at the end. In apparent support of the message portrayed by the ad, the Newspaper Association of America awarded it the prestigious Annual Athena Award for 1998 (www.naa.org/display/athena98/grandprize.html).†

*Year in Review, 1996, cnn.com.

†I was included in a group of linguists and scholars from all over the country who attempted unsuccessfully to get the *New York Times* to offer equal space for a rebuttal of the ad. The editors refused to publish either the ad or a letter to the editor.

Behind the humor and outrage was the shame that some group of black folks had dared to air our dirty little secret—that a lot of us didn't know how to "talk right," and some didn't much care what other folk thought about it. The even deeper secret was that even those of us who had acquired the "standard dialect" still loved and used aspects of Ebonics all the time. From the call and response rhyming speeches of Reverend Jackson, to the perfectly rendered voices of Alice Walker's, Toni Morrison's, and Zora Neale Hurston's heart-touching characters, to the jivin' d.j.'s on all the Black radio stations, to all of our mothers, brothers, and ourselves, our language has always been a part of our very souls. When we are with our own, we revel in the rhythms and cadences of connection, in the "sho nuf"s, and "what go roun' come roun' "s, and in the "ain' nothin' like the real thing' "s. So what was the problem?

The real issue was our concern about what others would think. We worried how, after years and years of trying to prove ourselves good enough, we might again be dismissed as ignorant and unworthy by those in power, by "the white folks." We worried that our children would be viewed, and subsequently treated, as "less than"—in schools now, and in the workplace later. Consequently, those of us who reach for or attempt to maintain middle-class acceptability work hard to stamp out the public expression of the language with which we enjoy such a love/hate relationship.

Our fears are not unfounded. When I searched the Internet during the Ebonics debate, I found some of the most horrendous racist comments I could have imagined. Although I cannot find the exact quote, I believe I paraphrase pretty accurately what one man wrote: "Well, the niggers have finally admitted what we all knew all along. They are just too stupid to learn to speak English like the rest of us." Other comments echoed the same sentiments—if in slightly more polite words—that the language spoken by many African Americans was merely further evidence of their cognitive deficiency.

Recently, a friend who is a speech pathologist told me about one of her current clients. A major national consulting firm contacted my friend and asked if she could work with one of their

employees on language improvement. Apparently, the employee was absolutely brilliant in computer technology, but problems arose each time she was sent out on a job. The hiring company invariably called the consulting firm and requested they send someone more knowledgeable. Even after the consulting firm assured the company representatives that this woman was absolutely the best in the country for what they wanted, they still balked. The consultant in question is an African American woman whose speech patterns reflect her Southern, rural roots. None of the companies that hired her could move past her language to appreciate her expertise. Indeed, just before the consulting firm contacted the speech pathologist, one company had sent the firm a long, insulting letter listing every word the consultant had "mispronounced" and every grammatical "mistake" she had made. The consulting firm desperately wanted her expertise, but needed it to be packaged in a form that was acceptable to its clients. Perhaps we have in our country's development reached a stage in which some of the American populace is willing to see beyond skin color to access intellectual competence, but there are as yet few pockets which can "listen beyond" language form.

So, when my child's language reflects that of some of her peers, I feel the eyes of "the other" negatively assessing her intelligence, her competence, her potential, and yes, even her moral fiber. So, I forgive myself for my perhaps overly emotional reaction, my painful ambivalence, for I know that it is less a rejection of the language form created by my people, and more a mother's protective instinct to insure that her child's camouflage is in order when she must encounter potential enemy forces.

But my child has other thoughts on the matter. I ask her if she knows why I critique her language, if she understands that there will be people who judge her on the basis of the words that she speaks. She answers, without hesitation, "Well, that's their problem!" And I hear my own words spoken back to me: "It doesn't matter what other people think about you, you have to be who you are. It's their problem if they can't appreciate how wonderful you are." I try another tack. "You're right, it is their problem. But suppose they are in charge of whether you get the job you want or the college you want to attend?" "Mom," she grins back at me, "you don't have to worry about me." "And just why is that?" She answers with a cheery nonchalance, " 'Cause I know how to code switch!" "Code switch," I repeat in astonishment. "Where did you hear that term?" The eleven year-old who has accompanied me to conferences and speaking engagements since she was an infant answered, "You know, I do listen to you sometimes!" as she bolts out of the door to ride her new scooter.

This code-switching business pushes my thinking. She is, of course, absolutely right. She and many of her friends do know how to code switch. Indeed, after further questioning, I learn that they even have names for the various codes they easily switch to and from, two of my favorites being "ghetto" and "chetto" (pronounced "ketto"). The first is probably self-explanatory, the second, they tell me—being Southern children, after all—is "a combination of 'country' and 'ghetto'."

This metalinguistic facility is amazing, and brings me to my second question. How is it that we spend upwards of twelve years trying to get the standard English dialect into the heads of African American children, when my daughter, and many more like her (including some middle-class White children who go to school with African American children) acquire additional dialects almost as quickly and easily as they change sneaker brand allegiances. Clearly it is not due to a high number of "contact hours" with the new dialect. The only contact is really in school and most of school time is devoted to listening to teachers talk. No, there must be another explanation. I have come to realize that acquiring an additional code comes from identifying with the people who speak it, from connecting the language form with all that is self-affirming and esteem-building, inviting and fun. When we're relaxed and enjoying ourselves on a long-awaited vacation, many of us tend to take on aspects of the lilt of the Irish or the rhythm of Caribbean speech patterns. We do it subconsciously because we associate the language with good times.

Through his study of second-language acquisition, Stephen

Krashen distinguishes the processes of conscious learning (rule-based instruction) from unconscious acquisition ("picking up" a language in a social setting). 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 form. This led him to suggest what he called an 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, . . . [creating] a mental block . . . [which] will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition."* In other words, the less stress and the more fun connected to the process, the more easily it is accomplished. When she left her previous school, Maya's self-esteem was low. She considered herself an outcast, once even referring to herself as among the "dregs" of the school. When she arrived at her new school, she was embraced by the children there. She was invited into the group, appreciated for what she brought, and she found that her interests were a vital part of these children's culture. In Krashen's words, her affective filter was lowered and she subconsciously embraced the language of her new friends, as she felt embraced by them.

How does this differ from schools' attempts to produce standard English speakers? First of all, students rarely get to talk in classrooms. The percentage of talk by the teacher far outweighs that by all the students put together. When students do get a chance to speak, if anyone uses what the teacher considers to be "bad English," the transgressor is told that he or she is speaking incorrectly and must "fix" the language in order to gain a response: "Say it right or don't say it at all," or an even harsher equivalent. Secondly, the standard dialect is embedded in instruction that has little connection to children's cultural lives and personal interests. Children are taught through worksheets or textbooks that make no

*Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition* (New York: Pergamon, 1982).

reference to their lived experiences. Teachers seldom know much about the children's lives and communities outside of the classroom and either don't know how to or aren't willing to connect instruction to issues that matter to students, their families, and their community. Nowhere is the student's very personhood acknowledged or celebrated. Thirdly, the children whose language is considered defective are themselves viewed as defective. Spoken language has been shown to be one of the key means that teachers, like the corporate world, use to assess the intellect of individuals (Ray Rist). There are doubts in the school adults' minds about some children's cognitive competence since they don't "sound" intelligent.

Finally, there is little in the curriculum that apprises the students of their intellectual legacy—of the fact that people who look like them created much of the knowledge base of today's world. When instruction is stripped of children's cultural legacies, then they are forced to believe that the world and all the good things in it were created by others. This leaves students further alienated from the school and its instructional goals, and more likely to view themselves as inadequate. In short, it would appear that every feature of Krashen's affective filter is in place in the school's attempt to "teach" the standard dialect. The students don't identify with the teachers who question their intelligence or with a curriculum that ignores their existence. They have little opportunity to speak, and become overanxious about being corrected when they do. Subsequently, even when given teacher-sanctioned speaking opportunities, they opt not to. And they are not motivated to learn the new dialect because nothing presented within it connects to their own interests.

I, however, don't believe this need be the case. Watching Maya and her friends skillfully and easily acquire a second code, I am compelled to look for ways that their accomplishment might be replicated in a classroom context. One of the first measures that must be addressed is connected to the Ebonics debate and the Oakland policy which precipitated it. The Oakland School Board realized that as long as teachers viewed children who spoke a par-

ticular language form as deficient, then no amount of instructional modification would make much difference. Therefore, they sought to help teachers understand that no language form was better than another from a linguistic or cognitive standpoint. Further, they wanted teachers to understand that Ebonics was rule-based, just like the standard dialect, and that those rules had an historic basis in West African languages. Once teachers really internalize these facts, then it is much more difficult for them to judge their students' abilities solely on the basis of their language form. If the students feel the linguistic equivalent of Maya's feeling the need to be prettier in order to have friends, or having to have lip reduction plastic surgery in order to be acceptable, then they will eventually reject those who make them feel inferior and unacceptable. Just as Maya's new friends made her feel beautiful, brilliant, and "part of the club," teachers have to create similar conditions for their students. If students are to acquire a second language form in school, teachers must not only see their students as nondeficient, they must understand their brilliance, and the brilliance of their home language. To quote Aileen Moffitt, the White teacher in Oakland who published the open letter on the Internet during the Ebonics mania: "[As a result of studying Ebonics through the Oakland Standard English Proficiency Project] I have also developed an appreciation of the language. Ebonics has a richness that goes beyond the obvious features (of grammar, syntax, phonology, phonetics, morphology, and semantics). There are also characteristics of the non-verbal, the gestural, the rhythmic, and the emotional quality of the speech. I may be fluent in the grammatical rules of Ebonics, but I am definitely NOT proficient in these other qualities. Yet I can appreciate and admire them for the richness of expression that they provide. Poetry in Ebonics (including Maya Angelou's) can be music to my ears".*

Secondly, if we are to invite children into the language of school, we must make school inviting to them. In almost every school I have visited, private conversations with children will elicit the

*January 26, 1997, http://members.tripod.com~cdorsett/aileen.htm.

same response: Almost no one in the school ever listens to them. There is no more certain a way to insure that people do not listen to you as to not listen to them. Furthermore, by not listening, teachers cannot know what students are concerned about, what interests them, or what is happening in their lives. Without that knowledge it is difficult to connect the curriculum to anything students find meaningful. And just how do we do that, even if we want to connect children's lives to the curriculum? After all, isn't school about what kids need to know, not what interests them? There are many possible examples, but I will proffer only a few.

I have spent a great deal of time in schools, most recently in one middle school that is 98 percent African American. I was often at the school during its weekly assembly, and at every assembly the teachers spent a good chunk of time berating the students for engaging in grooming during school or class time. "You don't comb your hair at school. You comb it in the morning and you leave it alone. You are not here for a beauty pageant, you are here to learn." Etc., etc., etc. I knew the kids were pretty much ignoring the lectures because even I was tired of hearing it. Furthermore, I had seen little or no change in their behavior—the hair combing continued. Of course anyone who has been anywhere near a middle school knows that there are few things of more interest to eighth-grade girls (and nowadays boys) than hair. Indeed, many African American girls will tell you that they want to be hairdressers. Although it had not apparently dawned on the teachers, it was clear that nothing they said was going to change the students' behavior. I had been thinking about all this for a few days when I woke up in the middle of one night with the thought, "Okay, if those kids want to do hair, we're going to do hair!"

A staple in most twelve-year-old African American girls' book-bag is a bottle of "Luster's Pink Oil Lotion Moisturizer." The first step was to give a bottle of this to the science teacher. His job was to develop a unit on the chemical content of the hair dressing (and other popular hair and makeup products). Students could learn the names and properties of the chemicals and what other purposes they served. They would also learn the effects of these chemicals

on human beings. The teacher could further have students explore the processes for testing the products by contacting the pertinent companies. Next was a trip to the Internet, where I found the work of Dr. Gloria Gilmer. Dr. Gilmer is an ethnomathematician (one who looks at mathematics through a cultural lens), and founding President of the International Study Group on Ethnomathematics.* Dr. Gilmer created a unit on patterns and tesselations (filling up a two-dimensional space by congruent copies of a figure that do not overlap) by studying African braiding. She interviewed braiders, along with students and teachers, and then developed several classroom activities as a result of the interviews, including 1) Draw a tesselation using an octagon and square connected along a side as a fundamental shape, and 2) Have a hairstyle show featuring different tesselations. As I read Dr. Gilmer's ideas, I thought of other ideas that would use braiding as a basis for academic studies:

> Have students interview braiders as to the cultural significance of the patterns.
> Study symmetry and asymmetry in corn rows.
> Since most braiders are from Africa, interview the braiders as to what is going on in their home countries and why they decided to leave.
> Create a linguistic map of Africa based on the interviews.

I also found a Web site that traced hairstyles through history (www.queensnewyork.com/history/hair.html) and found wonderful tidbits about a subject that has apparently interested humankind since the dawn of history. For instance, Sumerian noblewomen dressed their hair in a heavy, netted chignon, rolls and plaits, powdered it with gold dust or scented yellow starch, and adorned it with gold hairpins and other ornaments; Babylonian and Assyrian men dyed their long hair and square beards black, and crimped and curled them with curling irons; and in classical Greece the

*www.math.buffalo.edu/mad/special/gilmer-gloria__HAIRSTYLES.html.

upper classes used curling irons, and some women dyed their hair red (or in Athens, even blue, dusted with gold, white, or red powder). The site referred to the hairstyles of many other cultures and time periods, and could provide the perfect entrée into the study of history for the girls in question.

Since so many of these girls say that they want to be hairdressers when they grow up, I decided to look into what is entailed in being a successful cosmetologist. I found that it was ideal to have a working knowledge of bookkeeping/record keeping; marketing; small business operation and entrepreneurship; chemistry; anatomy; physiology; basic psychology; public speaking; interpersonal communication; and computer operations. Furthermore, they would have to use math to formulate chemicals for different hair types; study angles so as to achieve the right amount of layers or volume; study biology, anatomy, and chemistry to obtain the knowledge to give proper facial treatments for a particular skin type or structure and to maintain proper hygiene. Finally, in order to use the various kinds of electrical apparatus needed in their trade, cosmetologists need to understand galvanic and faradic currents.

With some attention and thought, any teacher should be able to create a curriculum for many school-based subjects from that spectrum of topics. The object is not to lower standards or just teach what is interesting to the students, but to find the students' interests and build an academic program around them. Learning a new language form is not just a matter of teaching language. It is teaching, period. How we do it affects how children choose to talk. When students' interests are addressed in school, they are more likely to connect with the school, with the teacher, with the academic knowledge, and with the school's language form. Just as Maya found her interests reflected by her new schoolmates and subsequently adopted their language form, so students who find their interests reflected in their school would likely do the same.

The final aspect of my thinking on how schools can change their modus operandi to better enable students to reduce their affective filter and gain access to the standard dialect also stems from Maya's

example. Just as she felt inadequate—"less than," one of the "dregs"—before leaving her former school, so many African American children feel upon entering any school. We have not fully realized the extent to which the media and general American belief systems have permeated the consciousness of African American children. Many have internalized the beliefs of the larger society that they and people who look like them are less than the intellectual norm. From media portrayals of African American criminals, to news broadcasts which ignore the positive models of African American maleness, to a focus in schools on slavery rather than on the brilliance of the African intellectual legacy, children come to believe that there is nothing in their heritage to connect to schooling and academic success.

Recently, a young student teacher confessed to me that she did not know what to say when an African American middle-school boy said to her, "So, Ms. Summers, they made us the slaves because we're dumb, huh?" I have spoken often of the young teenager who wondered why I was trying to teach her multiplication because "Black people don't multiply, they just add and subtract. White people multiply!" And then there was the young man whose teacher asked him to look in a mirror and tell her what he saw. His response, "I don't see nothin'." Those of us who teach must first make our students recognize their potential brilliance. When we know the real history of Africa—the Egyptian wonders of technology and mathematics, the astronomical genius of the Mali Dogon, the libraries of Timbuktu—then we can teach our children that if they do not feel they are brilliant, then it is only because they do not know whence they came. Their not achieving is not the way things should be, but a serious break in the history of the world.

What happens when we do so, when we convince them that they come from brilliance, when we encourage them to understand their amazing potential? When they recognize that we believe in them, then they come to trust us, to accept us, to identify with us, and to emulate us. They will come, as Maya came, to adopt aspects of who we are, including our language. If we were to put all of

these classroom techniques to work, we would create schools in which children would more readily learn the standard dialect. Moreover, we would create settings in which children would learn all that we wish to teach them. Language form, after all, is merely one small part of a desired curriculum.

So, how do my two initial questions intersect? What is the connection between my emotional response to Maya's new-found language and the fact that schools fare so dismally in teaching the standard dialect? I propose that the negative responses to the children's home language on the part of the adults around them insures that they will reject the school's language and everything else the school has to offer. What can it mean to a child who encounters an adult whose goal is to "Speak Out Against Ebonics"? It can only represent the desire to speak out against those who are speakers of Ebonics—to stamp out not only the child, but those from whom the child first received nurturance, from whom she first felt love, for whom she first smiled. There is a reason our first language is called our mother tongue. To speak out against the language that children bring to school means that we are speaking out against their mothers, that their mothers are not good enough to be a part of the school world. And in the African American community, talking about someone's mother is the worst form of insult!

Ironically, the more determined we are to rid the school of children's home language, the more determined they must become to preserve it. Since language is one of the most intimate expressions of identity, indeed, "the skin that we speak," then to reject a person's language can only feel as if we are rejecting him. But what if we really do want what is good for the African American children in our care? What if we only want to protect them from the deprecating opinions of the larger society? What if we only want to provide them with the tools needed for success in the mainstream? Despite any good intentions, if we cannot understand and even celebrate the wonders of the language these children bring with them to the school—the language forged on African soil, tempered by two hundred years of love, laughter, and survival

in the harshest of conditions—then we have little hope of convincing them that we hold their best interests at heart. If we are truly to add another language form to the repertoire of African American children, we must embrace the children, their interests, their mothers, and their language. We must treat all with love, care, and respect. We must make them feel welcomed and invited by allowing their interests, culture, and history into the classroom. We must reconnect them to their own brilliance and gain their trust so that they will learn from us. We must respect them, so that they feel connected to us. Then, and only then, might they be willing to adopt our language form as one to be added to their own.

CHAPTER 4

Trilingualism

JUDITH BAKER

JUDITH BAKER is a high school English teacher who has discovered that when students know that their "home" language is respected, they can be fascinated by a study of the different "Englishes" they speak. They hear the southern roots in the language of an African American student who has lived his entire life in Boston and see how the grammar of Spanish (or Vietnamese or Russian or Haitian) makes patterns in the way in which first- or even second-generation immigrant students speak. When formal English no longer threatens to demean them, students are more than willing to master it. When teachers understand that they cannot force a language form upon their students, those students are more than willing to acknowledge that being "trilingual"—being as proficient in formal English and professional or technical English as they are in their "home" English—can only make them more effective.

I teach English to high school students in a large technical/vocational high school in the Boston Public Schools. My students are fairly representative of urban American teenagers, diverse in background, low to moderate in income levels and, unfortunately, often publicly portrayed in negative ways. They are especially castigated for having low standardized test scores and poor formal English skills. In short, my classes are a good place to develop methods to help young people become proficient speakers and writers of "standard English" and for me to study the mechanics of teaching formal academic English.

In my design of lessons for my students, I have been working on the theory that there are at least three forms of the English language that most Americans need to learn in order to lead socially fulfilling and economically viable lives at this time in history:

- "home" English or dialect, which most students learn at home, and recent immigrants often learn from peers, and which for first and second generation immigrants may be a combination of English and their mother tongue
- "formal" or academic English, which is learned by many in school, from reading, and from the media, although it may also be learned in well-educated families
- "professional" English, the particular language of one's

profession, which is mostly learned in college or on the job, or, in my school, in vocational education

I think that if I can make this "trilingualism" explicit and if I can motivate students to want to learn these "languages," these three forms of English, then I can enable them to master the actual mechanical differences between them. I begin by building upon a firm respect for each student's home language—languages which, after all, are what most of us need to express connection and affection with friends and family, and what we draw upon for much of our art and cultural expression. Once this respect for home language is established, I concentrate on how different forms of English are appropriate in different contexts, instead of relying on the right/wrong dichotomy students usually face in school. I do this because I want their own usage, vocabulary, modes of expression and their self-esteem to survive the language learning process.

One result of using a right/wrong Standard English model for teaching is that it leads to many of my students saying, "Here I am in this school which tells me I'm wrong, so what do I do? Fight them all the way, stick up for my culture, resist? Or give in to the teachers and employers, in order to support my family, and live a double life, preserving a different culture at home, out of sight of those who don't understand or value me for myself?" I see no reason why students have to be convinced that the way they talk is wrong in order to master formal English grammar and speech. In fact, I find that students can learn formal grammar, complex sentence structure, scientific jargon, and many other aspects of the various forms of the language, quite fast once they discover that they can have control over the choices they make: to learn, or not learn, the languages associated with cultures in which they may decide to participate.

One way we enter this examination in my classroom is to actually study the home languages students bring into class. We find patterns of speech, rules of grammar, vocabulary, tonal features, and emotional characteristics of language which we note, label, discuss and eventually compare to the features of what we call

"formal" English. I have done this successfully by asking groups of students to present the class with a good, complete description of how their members usually speak at home and with friends. I guide their preparation with the following steps:

- Come up with a name for the type of English you each speak.
- Call the class's attention to specific features of your speech by naming some of the examples of your speech, if those examples are different from formal English. Use this list for a start, giving examples of these things IF you commonly do them:

  - Failure to enunciate certain letters or sounds
  - clipped words
  - regional words or expressions (or even teenage usages)
  - slang
  - style-setting language (new, creative use of words and phrases)
  - use of other languages instead of English
  - use of other languages mixed in with English
  - double subjects
  - double negatives
  - leaving the 's' off third person singular present tense verbs
  - using the participle instead of the past tense verb
  - special tone of voice you use in special situations
  - accents or tonal features
  - use of your hands, eyes, and other "body language"
  - use of swear words, curse words or other formally "inappropriate" language (When and why do you use them, if you do?)
  - Other ways of using language that are especially interesting, creative, emotional or special in your culture or family

- Demonstrate the types of English you speak by holding a group discussion on whatever topic you like with each group member speaking his or her way.
- Prepare lots of examples of how you usually speak.
- Every member of the group must be part of the presentation to receive a grade.

I choose groups on the basis of common backgrounds whenever possible (Boston born, West Indian born, Latino, Cape Verdean, Asian background, European-American) and ask the groups to meet for an hour on each of two days to plan a presentation. I don't give them much direction, although I circulate among groups, especially if there seems to be too much gossip, not enough work, or too much confusion. I worry that they won't know what to do, but I really don't intervene much. The planning is often noisy and looks dysfunctional.

Here's a glimpse into how this project has worked. Dwayne was a member of the Boston-born group in one class. An African American seventeen-year-old whose family came from rural South Carolina, Dwayne taped an hour of his father's evening conversations with family in the kitchen, on the phone, and in front of the television. He played the tape for the class. Dwayne and the group noticed that his father tends to speak very slowly, with a musical tone which goes up and down more than an octave. Dwayne's father often clips word endings, so much so that often the class did not understand what he was saying on the tape recording, forcing Dwayne to translate. Students in Dwayne's working group noticed that Dwayne shares some of his father's speech patterns, although if they'd not heard the tape, they would not have labeled them "Southern." An interesting outgrowth of Dwayne's study of his father's speech was that he became interested in his own spelling. I think he realized that such habits as leaving the 's' off plural nouns was in some way related to his family's home language.

Juanita, a very vocal young woman who calls herself Puerto

Rican although she has lived in Boston most of her life, told the class:

> I speak English with my family, except with my grandparents. With my friends I speak English slang and sometimes Spanish. Sometimes when I speak Spanish I end up finishing my sentence in English because there is words that I don't know in Spanish.

Juanita had no trouble writing English, but felt that she needed a much larger vocabulary and a better eye for editing. She became much more willing to participate in class activities and to try harder when she encountered difficulties after doing this exercise.

Amador, a fairly recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic was asked "How long have you been in this country?"

Amador responded, "Four year."

When I asked him to say four years in Spanish, he responded, "quatro años." When I questioned him further, he said, "Every time I say that 'year,' that's a word that I know. I never heard that 's' on it."

In the discussion that followed, one student felt that it takes more time to add the 's.' Another felt that people who don't enunciate the word endings are just "lazy." One of the Spanish-background students noted that in Spanish there is usually a vowel at the end of a noun, but that in English one has to add the 's' to a consonant, which is harder to do. However, the class concluded that the "real" reason Amador didn't put an "s" on "year" was that he learned English from Americans who talk like that—that he learned English from his peers and not from his teachers.

As students study their home languages in my class, several very valuable things happen, not all of which I—or they—anticipate. One of the most wonderful for me is that I learn about their languages. While I was able to question Amador about the relationship between "four year" and "quatro años" because I have some familiarity with Spanish, and while I was able to guide

Dwayne to notice his father's "Southern" speech patterns, I have no way to anticipate difficulties that students with Vietnamese or Haitian or Russian backgrounds might have with formal English unless they teach me about their languages. For my students, the validation of their home language which comes from studying it allows them to feel comfortable with language study in general. It becomes just as acceptable to ask, "How do you say this in formal English?" as it is to ask, "How do you say this with your friends?" or, "How do you say this in your grandmother's kitchen?"

There is one obvious problem for disseminating this sort of teaching: one cannot *pretend* to respect students' home languages. If someone really felt that what certain students termed "Spanglish" or "Cringlish" or "Vietnamese-English" were really not dialects or home languages at all, but simply "broken" or "incorrect" English, they could not engage them in this type of study. If other teachers feel committed to the setting of a single "standard" for all English speech and writing in the U.S., I could not ask them to adopt these practices. However, I have found that my choice to honor these languages with formal study has been of great value in my classroom. Moreover, it has allowed us to go much further than my previous error-correction model of grammar study. We now have gone on to distinguish another form of language, the language of one's profession or trade, and we have laid the groundwork for more discoveries.

One of the ways in which the language study has led directly to chances for students to consider their language choices in life has come in our discussion of hypothetical situations in which students are likely to find themselves: job interviews, college classrooms, even the family dinner table.

Joao and Drucilla, two students whose families immigrated from Mexico, led their group in the following role-play:

Scenario: Son (played by me) returns home at Christmas from his first semester at college and his mom greets him in her own home language. College student responds in a more formal manner, using a few words his mom does not fully understand, and which sound somewhat alien to the rest of the family assembled for the holiday.

Students, playing the mother and family, had a wide variety of responses, some positive, some more negative.

In Variation I, mom responds negatively:

"You better take that mess out of this house. You're not better than nobody here."

"I am glad you are in college. But don't forget where you came from."

"Hablamos español en esta casa."

In Variation II, mom responds positively:

"I'm so proud of you talking so educated. This is why I saved money for college, and I hope the rest of you all children listen real close."

Here's another role play we tried:

Scenario: A task force has been set up at the higher level of a large business to strategize meeting stiff competition from another firm. The college student has become a junior executive, albeit one of very few from her/his race/ethnic group in the firm. This time students took all the roles.

Variation I: Our junior executive presents an advertising plan in the most formal variety of English.

Variation II: Our junior executive presents the same basic plan, but this time in her home language, or what the students in this class called "street talk."

Here are the reactions the rest of the class, who were playing the other members of the task force, had to Variation II:

- "She sounds ridiculous. Doesn't she know that doesn't play in here?"

- "Maybe if our ads were as creative as that, more people would listen to them. You know, the sneaker commercials do that."
- "It's fine for her to speak that way with her friends, but not at work."
- "I think people should respect you for your ideas, not for how you sound."

I was struck by the way that the differences of opinion became very discussable during the discussion of these role plays. Some Latino students reported that they feel more comfortable in the world if they always present themselves in formal English around non-Latino people; others felt inauthentic dropping their accent or their "Spanglish" (Pablo's term, not mine). The range of ideas and opinions on what is appropriate for each setting was very diverse and shifted as the discussion raised new issues.

I also realized that we had implanted the idea that learning a formal grammar is a choice a student makes—not a choice a teacher makes for a student. This was a real revelation to my students. Many understood that they had already made some choices in this regard, but not with the sanction and support of teachers, and not with a full and careful discussion of their options.

Patrina followed the traditional thinking about grammar learning when she wrote: "We don't hardly take time out to really listen. I mean the way we speak, we think it's correct. It's wrong, but we understand each other."

Algernon, on the other hand, saw language learning as exercising options: "[I now realize I have] the choice of speaking "formal," "slang" or both at certain times." Zaybell changed her habits: "I now listen to what I say and how I say it."

But it was Shawn who chose an even more challenging job. After writing his first long piece of prose, a fifty-page description of the trial of the man accused of murdering his brother, Shawn wrote, "What I would like to accomplish is to be able to write about something not in the least interesting. Because I want to be able to write about anything I want to write even though it may not be interesting. That's my problem. I find it so hard to work on something I dislike. So I feel if I don't get over that wall I never will."

When he entered the class, Shawn had told me that he couldn't write at all. I wish I had questioned him carefully at that time, so I would know what being able to write meant to him, and so that I might understand what happened inside him during the year. I think he began to set his own educational agenda at some point, but we certainly missed a wonderful opportunity to develop an understanding of how it happened.

As young people become less fearful of being manipulated or disrespected, I think they can become engaged in the study of their own language competence. They can weigh their options, choose how they want to speak and write in each new setting. In this atmosphere, the mechanics and usage and vocabulary of formal English no longer threaten to demean them. The study of *grammar* is very much a personal issue, a racial and class issue, a political issue—and doing it backward like this, motivation first, rules last, examining the dialects before the formal language, is something with which my students will cooperate. Further, for me the teacher, the roles of "student as expert" and "student as researcher" come a little more into focus each time we do projects like this, and as I tend to trust my students more, they in turn feel more respected and comfortable in class.

There are some new developments and some other ideas that I have yet to try. At the same time that students in my classes are studying their home languages, their peer languages, and academic English in my classroom, they are learning another set of languages in their technical classes. Although I had made some effort to examine technical or professional language with students before this, I had developed no project or systematic approach with which I was satisfied. Recently, however, my school instituted a required project in which students research and present an issue or process

in their technical fields. This has given me the impetus to study professional languages with my students.

Sandra and Tracy, students in the Culinary Arts program, usually speak a very stylish and dramatic style of teenage English with their friends and in class. But in their presentation on food-borne diseases, they easily adopted an almost teacherly professional manner. The other students picked this up immediately and questioned them about it.

Sandra replied, "This is serious. You wouldn't want someone coming into your restaurant and getting sick because your staff weren't washing down the counters properly." She did not appear to feel any pressure to respond in her usual "teen talk" in this setting.

Darrell took us to the data processing lab to show us his class web page and some basic Internet surfing. He seemed very comfortable with Internet jargon, and obligingly offered explanations for his less savvy classmates. This contrasted with a certain reticence I have noticed in class. Since Darrell's speech usually contains very little "slang," I sometimes feel he speaks less to avoid being criticized for using more formal speech than his classmates. But in the presentation atmosphere, Darrell was respected for his knowledge and vocabulary and he flourished.

Kai brought the class several small animals and taught us how to feed and care for them. Kai's terminology and explanations were very precise and formal, but as with the other presentations, the class members seemed to welcome this type of language and accepted it entirely as different from ordinary class discussion.

Looking back on this use of technical language in my classroom, I notice several things. First, I realize that had I not seen the students in this other language dimension, I would not have realized how easily they moved within it or how eager they would be to do so. I probably would not have expected them to show as much respect for each other's language accomplishments as they did. Mastery of this other kind of English (for we have not settled on a name for it) is simply not threatening to my students. I am now beginning to think about the workplace as a kind of bridge

for students to get to formal English, although I am just starting to think of ways to use the idea in planning lessons.

Over the next few years, I hope to listen with my students to English as it is spoken and written in all these different ways. I would like to arrange sessions where they sit in on, tape and transcribe conversations in many dialects or English variations, and then learn to analyze and compare them. I would like them to tape conversations at home and in informal classroom situations. I also hope, in cooperation with local colleges and with businesses which maintain partnerships with the school, to have students sit in on a number of other conversations in university and work environments.

My guess is that we could discover a number of useful and unexpected principles which would give us ideas for a joint plan of action to learn these "Englishes." We might possibly build a foundation for motivating each other to master the formal grammar which urban children are so criticized for not knowing. Implicit in all of this is my bet that a language barrier is part of what keeps many people "undereducated" and often poor. I am pretty sure that young people don't really understand this while they are in school, although they have inklings and the evidence surrounds them. I am convinced that high school students can achieve a deep and personal understanding of the most academic and formal varieties of English if it is separated from trappings which demean their own cultures. They still have to work harder than they are often willing to work to learn geometry and "foreign" languages and history and to write term papers, all of which are parts of the formal and professional curriculum that I think is very valuable. But I intend to explore this head-on assault on language learning and how it works in my classrooms.

The Skin That We Speak

Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom

Edited by

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and

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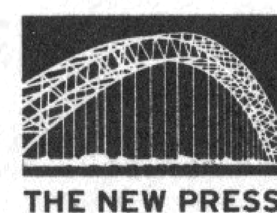

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