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Teaching English in the World

Some English teachers believe they should teach students to write and speak “correctly” by taking every opportunity to eliminate all of the “incorrect” features from students’ written and oral language. Teachers who take this approach run a high risk of eliminating not only language they view as incorrect but also valuable cultural linguistic variety.

All English teachers are invested in helping students develop better rhetorical skills in writing and speech. But insisting on only one version of English—“Standard English”—whitewashes the many Englishes that are actually used in the world and erases cultural differences that make students and their perspectives unique and original. (If the word *Englishes* strikes your ear as wrong, you might be interested to know that there is a respected linguistics journal named *World Englishes*.) While most English teachers would be outraged if asked to eliminate cultural variety in the literature they teach, many English teachers seem eager to deny students this variety in their language use. There is a way to move beyond this philosophical inconsistency.

Rebecca S. Wheeler, an English professor with an MS in linguistics from Georgetown and a PhD in linguistics from The University of

Chicago, is becoming one of the most important professional voices in language instruction. Her work centers on reducing the achievement gap in dialectically diverse classrooms. I invited Dr. Wheeler to share her work here because it reflects best practices in improving students’ command of English overall without eliminating non-Standard English features from all students’ language. Instead, she advocates deliberately recognizing the linguistic integrity and celebrating the cultural value of these non-Standard features. As Wheeler describes below, students learn Standard English better if they *also* learn how non-Standard Englishes function. Teachers’ respect for students’ home language results in students who respect the value of Standard English and learn it more readily.

Much of the practical savvy of Wheeler’s approach comes from her frequent collaborations with urban teacher Rachel Swords. Last July, the pair published an essay on code-switching in *Language Arts*, and they currently have a book manuscript in final review with NCTE.

Wheeler’s “both/and” approach to language instruction has tremendous promise for those of us who seek to value students’ voices and backgrounds *and* help them

build rhetorical skills that will enhance their success in the world beyond school.

Code-Switch to Teach Standard English

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Correcting Student Papers: A Sisyphean Task

It is Saturday night in Manhattan. Deborah is sitting on her couch, working through a pile of English papers for her eighth-grade students. She shakes her head. “What is *going on* here? I *know* I corrected this grammar point in Tashawna’s last English paper. But here it is again! How many times do I have to tell my kids not to leave off the apostrophe -s, to do possession the *right way*!”

She has been over it and over it, teaching her students how to show possession (“Tashawna, we write *Mama’s jeep*, not *Mamma jeep*”), how to show plural (“Rajid, do it the right way—*We need four T-shirts for our squad*, not *We need four T-shirt*”). And what about tense? Is it so hard to get it right? Where is that *-ed*? She tells her classes, “We write *Congress passed the law last fall*, not

Congress pass the law last fall.” Deborah uses the traditional, *correctionist* model of language arts.

Months pass. Deborah has been correcting these grammar points since school started. But her students are still leaving off the apostrophe *-s*, forgetting the plural *-s*, and struggling with past tense. Do not even start with subject–verb agreement (*Mom deserve a good man*) or the *dese/dem/dose* words (*dis morn-ing*). She has been trying to bush-whack her way out and is not having much success. These grammar thorns keep growing back, no matter how fast she tries to cut them down.

Of course, Deborah is not alone. Her fellow teachers seem to fight the same fight, and they are not sure about winning the education race with their students, let alone the grammar sprint.

Correction Steamrolls Students

Rajid has gotten yet another paper back from his teacher. Red ink all over it. “What? ‘Show possession!’ But I *did*! Look! Ri’ der. *Mama jeep*. And she says ‘Show plurals.’ I did! *Four T-shirt*. That plural awright.”

Rajid is confused and troubled. His teacher says he does not understand possession, plurality, and showing past time. But he has been using language successfully all his life—at home. Now, at school, it seems he cannot win: His way of speaking is “wrong,” “improper,” and “lazy.” *Their* way is right, proper, and good. And worse, they want to put him in special education to “fix” the way he talks. It is enough to make anyone want to quit talking. Or writing. They say he is supposed to give up his mama’s language. He is supposed to leave his kin behind and learn a

way of talking that feels all funny in his mouth. And he does not see anybody—not teachers, not the schoolbooks, and not the tests—recognize and honor the power of *his people’s* language. His community is *filled* with speech, from the neighborhood girls’ jump-rope chants, to the rough and tumble play of “yo mama,” to signifying, and the dozens, to the movement and uplift of his preacher’s Sunday sermons. And his heritage brings the world people such as Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesse Jackson, authors and orators whose language moves, stirs, and lives. Yet, in the eyes of the school, he, Rajid, is “lazy” and “broken” and has to turn his back on his home.

Collecting Home Speech Data for Language Arts Lessons

We switch scenes, to downtown Newport News, in Tidewater Virginia. Tamara works with her eighth-grade students’ papers. A veteran English teacher of twenty-nine years, she has spent her career here, in a middle school with one thousand students, 94 percent Black and 86 percent on free or reduced lunch. Papers are spread out around her, covering the coffee table and to the right and left of her on the couch (Ali, her cat, is not happy about this).

Tamara is not “correcting” her students’ writing—she is engaged in a different activity: collecting data for her next language arts lessons. She has finished responding to her students’ overall focus, organization, and elaboration, and she has checked that they have brought in enough details to make their points clear and vivid. Since

her students will need to use Standard English on their year-end tests under the No Child Left Behind Act (not to mention in the broader world after school), she turns to grammar. She needs to know what home speech patterns are cropping up in her students’ school writing.

Tamara probes: “OK. Where is my class on usage? Hmm. Shamika has made the switch on two biggies—plurals (*two dog* versus *two dogs*) and agreement (*My dad cook dinner for us* versus *My dad cooks dinner*). Way to go, Shamika! What is she still working on? OK. She is still using Everyday English patterns for possession (*Dad job takes a lot of time*). Ah! And here: several examples of home-speech past time (*The sign say “Whites only”*). Yep, those are both in the top ten. OK, now how about Duane? Good! He has plural and agreement in Formal English. Possessives, too! Now he needs to *add* the way Standard English shows past time to his linguistic toolkit.”

Insights from ESL Help Teach Students a Second Dialect: Standard English

Clearly, Tamara is approaching her class differently than Deborah. She understands that the students are not making mistakes in Standard English. Instead, they are following the patterns of a different language variety—“informal English,” African American English or, more generally, the Everyday English of the community.

In her work with students, Tamara is drawing on research from linguistics. Nearly fifty years ago, in *Linguistics across Cultures*, ESL specialist Robert Lado explained that the patterns of people’s first language (sound, word endings,

and grammar) will *transfer* into how they talk and write in a second language. A conversation I heard recently at a Chinese take-out illustrates this. A customer had asked the woman behind the counter, “Ma’am, could I please have two forks, two plates, and two napkins?” to which the Chinese owner replied, “Yes sir, two fork, two plate, and two napkin.” Here are the echoes of Chinese grammar. Since Chinese shows plurality by number words and sentence context, that grammar pattern transferred into the woman’s English exchange with her customer.

Language transfer also applies when we are talking about a person learning to speak or write in a second dialect. So, when an African American student writes *I have two dog and two cat*, we see the grammar of community language transferring into school expression.

Code-Switching and Contrastive Analysis: Tools for Teaching Standard English

ESL offers teachers a pair of useful classroom tools—contrastive analysis and code-switching. When grammar patterns from the first dialect crop up as a student speaks or writes formal English, we see a contrast between two grammatical systems (e.g., Everyday English shows past time by context or common knowledge—I *watch TV yesterday*—and Formal English shows it redundantly by context *and* verb ending—I *watched TV yesterday*). An ESL technique illustrated below—*contrastive analysis*—helps students become consciously and rigorously aware of the grammatical differences between home speech and school speech. Then, students can *code-switch* between

language varieties. To *code-switch* is to choose the language appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose. Often students will need to choose formal Standard English. Other times, as in creating dialogue, for rhetorical effect, or for ongoing solidarity with their community, students may need to choose informal or Everyday English.

Through contrastive analysis and code-switching we *add* Standard English to our students’ linguistic toolboxes.

Linguistics Brings Scientific Method into Language Arts

Tamara has stopped correcting so-called errors. Instead, she collects *data* from her students’ writing. Her students are *not* struggling with possession or plurality. Indeed, they are fluent at these grammatical forms. They are just following a set of rules (a grammar) different from Standard English.

How can that be? Surely we *know* in our bones that examples such as *a presidents* or *three cat* are flat-out wrong. How can it be otherwise?

Linguistics offers us the central insights that unbind this pesky conundrum. I will illustrate by exploring the rules for possession. Return again to Tamara sitting on her couch, papers spread out all around her. She finds that over and over, students express possession differently than she had hoped and expected. But she sees method to their apparent madness. She gets out her laptop and opens a file of possessive examples she has collected from student writing:

- > My goldfish name is Scaley.
- > I don’t understand my little sister work.

- > Ellen Goodman essay tell all about violence on TV.
- > It is not the children fault.

Something feels the same to her about each example, some pattern that each student is *unconsciously* following. She probes: What is going on? Where *is* the meaning of possession? So she underlines the place where possession seems to live and looks again. *Goldfish name, little sister work, Ellen Goodman essay, the children fault*. That’s it! The pattern jumps out at her. The possessor sits right before the thing possessed. Or, put more simply, in this language variety we signal possession by the pattern, *owner + owned*.

Following basic techniques of linguistics, Tamara realizes that she has a *hypothesis*. True to scientific

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method, she double-checks. Does the first example follow the pattern *owner + owned*? *Goldfish name*? Yes, *goldfish* in some sense owns or has the name, and *name* is the thing owned (though of course the meaning of possession is more complex than this). She checks the other examples. “Yes, yes, yes. Each example follows that pattern. *My little sister* owns or has the *work*. *Ellen Goodman* has or owns (in some sense) the *essay*. OK! That is *it!*” Tamara realizes she has indeed found the grammar rule her students are following. *Possession = owner + owned*.

The students are not leaving off the Standard English apostrophe -s; they are successfully following the African American English pattern for possession—*that* pattern does not call for an apostrophe or an s.

Since students are not making mistakes, there is nothing to correct. Instead, we will draw on *contrastive analysis* to help students learn Standard English.

From Correction to Contrast: Using Code-Switching to Teach Standard English

Tamara is building a *contrastive analysis* chart from student sentences (see fig. 1). At first, she leaves the bottom of the chart blank—that is where she will write the grammar pattern after the students identify it.

She will use this chart to help the students discover and own the contrasting ways that African American English and Standard English show possession. Possession is just one pattern, albeit one of the most frequent ones. During the fall semester, she will use contrastive analysis to work through the rest of the top ten patterns with her students. Here are a few others she will address: subject-verb agreement (*She walk*); showing past

time (*I finish yesterday*); *be* understood (*He ___ cool with me*); making negatives (*She won't never*); plurality (*Three cat*); and *a* versus *an* (*an rapper, a elephant*). As students master the contrasts, they will translate, or code-switch, from Everyday to Formal English as appropriate to the setting.

Code-Switching: The Endgame of the Writing Process

Now, what do we *do* with this linguistically informed perspective on student language? As one of my workshop participants in New Orleans commented, “Code-switching changes *everything* in how I teach English.” True—from helping the students see language in new ways, to how you respond to student papers, to your Daily Oral Language (DOL) work and, most fundamentally, to how you regard and assess students who speak an Everyday language distinct from Standard English. The ramifications in the classroom are vast (see Wheeler and Swords).

The place for code-switching in the writing process is in the endgame—during editing. *After* students have done the content work on their essays—homing in on a main idea, brainstorming, organizing, drafting, elaborating, and revising. After the *content* is in place, then comes code-switching.

Research Shows Code-Switching Works

Research from elementary school through college shows that code-switching *is a successful method* for teaching Standard English.

In Chicago, Hanni Taylor had been concerned that her African American college students were not learning formal English. So she decided to compare how first-year composition students performed in response to two teaching methods. In one class she used the correctionist approach. In the other, she helped students discover how the grammar of their home language contrasted with Standard English grammar.

FIGURE 1. Tamara's Contrastive Analysis Chart

Showing Possession	
Derrick team ↔ Derrick's team	
<p>INFORMAL ENGLISH</p> <p>I played on <u>Derrick team</u>.</p> <p>My <u>goldfish name</u> is Scaley.</p> <p>I don't understand my <u>little sister work</u>.</p> <p><u>Ellen Goodman essay</u> tell all about violence on TV.</p> <p>It is not the <u>children fault</u>.</p>	<p>FORMAL ENGLISH</p> <p>I played on <u>Derrick's team</u>.</p> <p>My <u>goldfish's name</u> is Scaley.</p> <p>. . . my <u>little sister's work</u>.</p> <p><u>Ellen Goodman's essay</u> . . .</p> <p>It is not the <u>children's fault</u>.</p>
The Pattern	
<i>owner + owned</i>	<i>owner + 's + owned</i>

Her results were striking. By the end of the semester, students taught with traditional methods did not improve. Indeed, their Standard English performance got *worse*—these students used 8.5 percent *more* African American features in their formal writing. The class using *contrastive analysis* showed remarkable success. These students used 59.3 percent *fewer* African American vernacular features in formal writing. By contrasting the language varieties, students were able to learn the detailed differences between the two and therefore limit how much African American English grammar transferred into their Standard English writing.

Parallel results come from a New York study of African American elementary students. Educational psychologists Howard Fogel and Linnea C. Ehri analyzed whether traditional approaches or contrastive ones were more successful in teaching African American children Standard English. The results were eye-opening: While students in the traditional groups showed *no improvement*, students learning through contrastive analysis nearly *doubled* in their ability to produce Standard

English forms (222). Clearly, contrastive analysis holds great promise in fostering Standard English mastery in our schools.

A Call to Change

John R. Rickford, Martin Luther King Jr. Centennial Professor of African and African American Studies at Stanford University, calls on us to change. He is penetratingly clear: “the evidence that schools are failing massive numbers of African American students with existing methods is so overwhelming that it would be counterproductive and offensive to continue using them uncritically” (“Language” 322). He and all linguists who teach Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) are equally clear on what methods work—“teaching methods which DO take vernacular dialects into account in teaching the standard work better than those which DO NOT” (“Oakland,” par. 5). That is what I have been offering you, a method for teaching Standard English that harvests the insights of fifty years of linguistic research. It is fertile and proven. Come, let us

reach for methods that work: code-switching and contrastive analysis.

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EJ 40 Years Ago

Talking Back to Advocates of a Standardized Language

Some influential people, however, do speak clearly, and clearly speak for standards that have nothing to do with the fully responsible choice of language. One group that speaks up from time to time, speaks up for Big Brother, telling us that we should make our students speak and write alike since a standardized language is a necessity for an industrial society. The answer is, of course, that an industrial society is not worth that price. Perhaps our machines do run us and are making us more like them every day, but we can still stay human by talking back. When more people are shouting about freedom than understand it, we might set one frail example by not shouting but by speaking freely.

James Sledd. “On Not Teaching English Usage.” *EJ* 54.8 (1965): 698–703.