Codeswitching: Tools of Language and Culture Transform the Dialectally Diverse Classroom

Codeswitching and contrastive analysis are tools of language and culture that can transform literacy instruction.

Rebecca S. Wheeler
Rachel Swords

Student: *Mrs. Swords, why you be teachin' maf in da aftanoon?*

Mrs. Swords: *Why do I* what*?*

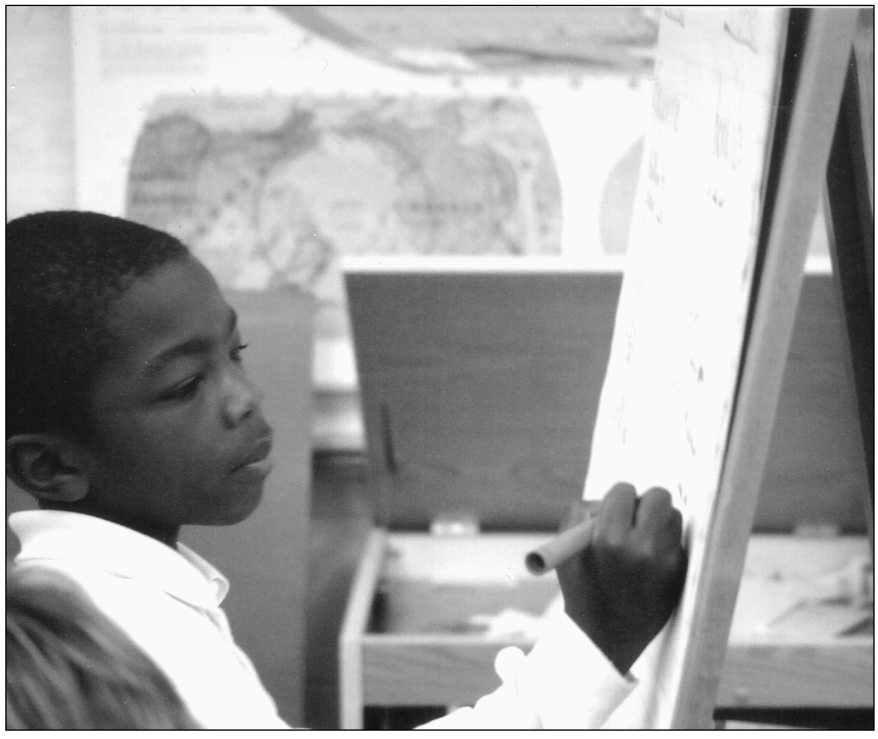
Student: *Why you be teachin' maf in da aftanoon?*

Mrs. Swords: *Why do I what?*

Student: *Why* you be teachin' maf *in da aftanoon?*

Mrs. Swords: *We don't say, "why you* be *teaching math in the afternoon. . . ." We say, "Why* are *you teaching math in the afternoon?"*

Student: *Oh, OK.*



The next day the child would begin again, "Mrs. Swords, why do we be havin' maf in da aftanoon?" And Rachel would reply, "Why do we *what*?" It was always the same. She would attempt to "correct" the child's "error," but it was clear that no learning was taking place.

Rachel Swords began her career in an urban elementary school by correcting every sentence she deemed incorrect. She noticed as time went on, however, that her students were asking significantly fewer questions. She would call for questions and her students would begin: "Mrs. Swords, why you be . . . ? Is you? Ain't you? Never mind." The students knew she was going to correct them. They tried to ask the question in the form the school system wanted, but they didn't know how. Rather than risk the embarrassment of being corrected in front of the class, students became silent.

After Rachel realized why the questions had stopped, she tried another, more passive approach. When a child asked, "Mrs. Swords, why you be teachin' maf afta lunch?" she would repeat their question in Mainstream American English ("Why do I teach math after lunch?") and then answer it, also in the same language variety. While

this method didn't embarrass the children or hinder their questioning, the children's language did not change. Even though Rachel consistently corrected their speech and writing, her students still did not learn the standard English forms.

Concern with the vernacular dialects our children bring to school has been long-standing. Heath (1983) noted that school desegregation in the 1960s brought out these issues: "Academic questions about how children talk when they come to school and what educators should know and do about oral and written language were echoed in practical pleas of teachers who asked: 'What do I do in my classroom on Monday morning?'" (p. 1). Now, more than 30 years later, teachers remain concerned. Christenbury (2000) has observed that "[o]ne of the most controversial—and difficult—issues for English teachers is their responsibility to students who speak what is considered "nonstandard" English, English that violates the usage rules we often mistakenly call 'grammar'" (p. 202).

Christenbury's comment sets the stage for the central focus of our article. English teachers routinely equate standard English with "grammar," as if other language varieties and styles lack grammar, the systematic and rule-governed backbone of language. Yet, the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead, she or he is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community. Teachers can draw upon the language strengths of urban learners to help students codeswitch—choose the language variety *appropriate* to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose. In doing so, we honor linguistic and cultural diversity, all the while fostering students' mastery of the Language of Wider Communication, the de-facto lingua franca of the U.S.

The motivation for this article lies in our desire to bring the insights of 20th-century linguistics to bear on the achievement gap, the "devastating rates at which schools fail African American students" (Rickford, 1999, p. 22). Rickford asserts that "the evidence that schools are failing massive numbers of African students with existing methods is so overwhelming that it would be counterproductive and offensive to continue using them uncritically" (p. 3). Accordingly, we offer some of our ideas for creating an accessible, research-based approach to language arts in the dialectally diverse, multicultural classroom.

English teachers routinely equate standard English with "grammar," as if other language varieties and styles lack grammar, the systematic and rule-governed backbone of language.

While the jury is still out on whether dialect contrast actually interferes with reading comprehension, it is clearly the case that when an urban teacher tells minority-language students that their language is wrong and error-filled, she creates a seriously deleterious effect in the classroom. As the teacher seeks to eradicate vernacular language and culture, not only does she remove a link that could bring relevance to the classroom lives of the children, but she assails the child's family and home community, thus contributing to a barrier between the values of home and school. As a result, even if the contrast of dialect structure itself is not found to significantly impede children's performance, teachers' expectations and perspectives on dialects, cultures, and the vernacular speakers themselves do hamper children's learning. Hence, an approach that affirms the rule-governed nature of all language varieties holds promise in fostering a culturally compatible classroom. In turn, a culturally consonant classroom, engaging the student far more broadly, holds promise for reducing the achievement gap in America.

We chart our course in two voices, that of a university professor and that of an urban third-grade teacher. Rachel shares her movement as a teacher from a monodialectal, monocultural model to a multidialectal, multicultural model of language arts in her classroom. Understanding the nature of language variation (across region, ethnic identity, social class, language styles, and registers) provides language arts teachers with a fertile ground from which to build a welcoming, multicultural language arts classroom.

Traditional Language Arts Methods Fail Many African American Students

Rachel became involved in this project because of her concern over how her students fared on statewide tests. "When last year's disaggregated scores for the Virginia Standards of Learning tests (SOL) were put up on the board, in *every* case, our Black children were performing much lower than our White children. It is very disheartening to say that I've taught the same way to all the children all year long and my White children are passing the tests and my Black children are not. Then our principal put up the scores for the entire district; it looked exactly

the same. The children speaking African American vernacular are doing significantly worse on the writing test—not two or three points. In some schools, African American students scored 36 points lower than White children on average."

Such disparities of language performance are neither isolated nor restricted to Virginia. Rickford (1996) reported the results of a study of student writing performance across school districts contrasting in ethnicity and socioeconomic standing. The study revealed that:

> *. . . third grade kids in the primarily white, middle class Palo Alto School District scored on the 94th percentile in writing; by the [sixth] grade, they had topped out at the 99[th] percentile. By contrast, third grade kids in primarily African American working class East Palo Alto (Ravenswood School District) scored on the 21st percentile in writing, but by the sixth grade, they had fallen to the 3rd percentile, almost to the very bottom (p. 1).*

Similar statistics can be found in many other school districts and states. Minority language children seem to be confronting a brick wall when it comes to performance on standardized tests.

The question of why African American students struggle revolves around issues of language and culture, poverty, distribution of goods and resources, the physical conditions of school buildings, the training of teachers in urban schools, and ethnic and linguistic bias in standardized tests, just to name a few factors. While all of these issues need to be addressed, we focus here on approaches to language and culture in the linguistically diverse urban classroom.

We know that many urban African American children speak a language variety—African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—different from the language of the school (Delpit, 1995; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). While speaking a vernacular dialect has been *correlated* with reading failure, scholars continue to debate whether dialectal contrasts *cause* failure.

As of the mid 1990s, "the conclusion of most sociolinguists was that the semantic and structural differences between AAVE and other dialects were not great enough to be the primary causes of reading failure" (Labov, 1995, pp. 48–49). Indeed, some educational researchers have found no particular dialectal intrusion in the reading process (Goodman & Goodman, 2000). Yet, others demonstrated that "dialect *is* a source of reading interference" for speakers of AAVE and that the syntax of AAVE verb phrases resulted in African American students losing information regarding time structure of events in the test reading passage (Steffensen, Reynolds, McClure, & Guthrie, 1982, p. 296). And in an experiment on vernacular speakers' acquisition of consonant clusters, Labov and Baker (n.d.) found that "variability in speech is responsible in part for difficulties in decoding" standard English (p. 15). Thus, results are inconclusive on whether contrast of dialect structure itself hampers language-minority children in reading standard English.

Beyond linguistic structure, cultural conflict lies at the heart of why schools fail African Americans.

Beyond linguistic structure, cultural conflict lies at the heart of why schools fail African Americans. Thus, in Harlem, the child's cultural system "opposed the values of the school system, which was seen as the particular possession and expression of the dominant white society" (Labov, 1995, p. 42). In turn, schools may ban literature reflecting African American language and culture. One Virginia librarian commented to us that "no children's books containing African American dialect are available in our school. This is a *very* controversial topic." As Smitherman observed, "[W]hen you lambast the home language that kids bring to school, you ain just dissin dem, you talking bout they mommas!" (quoted in Richardson, 2002, p. 677).

Further, as teachers absorb "widespread, destructive myths about language variation" (Wolfram, 1999, p. 78), their cultural vantage turns to pedagogical damage. In other words, whether black or white, a teacher is likely to consider a child speaking African American Vernacular English as slower, less able, and less intelligent than the child who speaks standard English (Labov, 1995). Such *dialect prejudice* reduces teacher expectations for the child's abilities (Baugh, 2000). As teacher expectations are reduced, so potential child performance is diminished (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Nieto, 2000). No wonder that under these conditions, "the longer African American inner city kids stay in school, the worse they do" (Rickford, 1996, p. 1).

Traditional Responses to Language Varieties: Correction Does Not Work

It is not surprising that Rachel's initial attempts to "correct" her children's language did not produce change in their performance. As Gilyard (1991) shares in his account of his life as a black child in the American educational system, "generations of Black English speakers have been subjected to

'correction' programs that haven't worked" (p. 114).

Teachers envision a single "right way" to construct a sentence (Birch, 2001) and so criticize student writing such as:

- I have two sister and two brother.
- Christopher family moved to Spain.
- Last year, he watch all the shows.

Teachers often view this kind of writing as error-filled, believing that the child does not know how to show plurality, possession, and tense. Believing that the student has left off the plural marker, the apostrophe '–s,' and '–ed,' teachers will respond, "That's not how you do it!" This approach seeks to eradicate the child's home language.

Christenbury (2000) observes that "telling or teaching students that their language is *wrong* or *bad* is not only damaging, but *false*" (p. 203). Doing so presupposes that only one language form is "correct" in structure and that this form is "good" in all contexts. Joos (1961) comments,

> *It is still our custom unhesitatingly and unthinkingly to demand that the clocks of language all be set to Central Standard time. . . . But English, like national languages in general, has five clocks. And the times that they tell are not simply earlier and later; they differ sidewise, too, and in several directions. Naturally. A community has a complex structure, with variously differing needs and occasions. How could it scrape along with only one pattern of English usage? (pp. 4–5).*

While the traditional approach attempts to correct, repress, eradicate, or subtract student language that differs from the standard written target, a different response to language becomes possible once we recognize that language comes in different varieties and styles, and each is systematic and rule-governed (Adger, Christian & Taylor, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman, 1981; Wolfram, Adger & Christian, 1999).

Instead of seeking to correct or eradicate styles of language, we may *add* language varieties to the child's linguistic toolbox, bringing a pluralistic vantage to language in the classroom (Gilyard, 1991; McWhorter, 1998). Such an approach allows us to maintain the language of the student's home community (CCCC,1974), while adding the linguistic tools needed for success in our broader society—Mainstream American English.

Key Notions from Applied Linguistics

A cluster of notions from applied linguistics underlies our work with language in the classroom: *dialect, language variety, style,* and *register.* Three insights about language serve as a foundation for all of these terms:

- Language is structured.
- Language varies by circumstance of use.
- Difference is *distinct from* deficiency.

A *dialect* is a "variety of the language associated with a particular regional or social group" (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 350). Since everyone is associated with a particular regional or social group, everyone speaks a dialect. Also known as *language varieties,* dialects vary in structure (sound, vocabulary, grammar, and social conventions for structuring conversations) on the basis of speakers' "age, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic group membership, and geographic region" (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999, p. 37). This means that so-called "standard" English is a dialect of English. Contrary to popular understanding, "'[d]ialect' does not mean a marginal, archaic, rustic, or degraded mode of speech" (Pullum, 1999, p. 44).

Register refers to the ways in which language varies by specific speech situations (e.g., newspaper headlines, rituals, recipes, technical writing, and even baby talk).

While variation in language structure is always present, a different kind of variation lies in the public's *attitudes* toward language. "Standard" English is often called "good" English while "nonstandard" English is considered "bad." These judgments are not based on linguistic grounds, but on sociopolitical considerations. Thus, what we call the *standard* is the language variety "associated with middle-class, educated, native speakers of the region" (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 284). People regard this variety as good because they regard its speakers as meritorious, but this judgment has nothing to do with an inherent structural superiority of so-called "standard" English.

Vernaculars or nonstandard varieties are those "varieties of a language that are not classified as standard dialects" (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 13). They contain socially stigmatized features such as the so-called English double negative ("I ain't got none") or irregular verb forms ("I seen it"). Just as the public

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holds standard varieties in high regard because of their high regard for their speakers, the public holds vernaculars in low regard and typically views its speakers with disregard. The judgment of badness is sociopolitical and has nothing to do with any structural inadequacy of vernacular dialects.

Finally, "standard" English is a misnomer, implying that only one standard exists. Yet, we can readily identify a range of standards from Formal Standard English (Written Standard English of grammar books, reference works, and the most established mainstream authors), Informal Standard English (a spoken variety defined by the absence of socially stigmatized structures), as well as Regional Standards (the accepted dialect of English in a particular region) (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

Although the issues of language standardization and instruction are complex, our core point remains: Language is structured. Its structure varies by circumstance. But to perceive this, we must let go of blinding conventional assumptions. Only then can we build upon the strengths of the language each child brings to school.

Discovering a New Vantage on Language in the Classroom

Rebecca teaches a class on language varieties in the schools and communities, where graduate students explore how all language is structured and how the choice of language form is based on setting. This insight is actually quite hard to hear, so immersed is our culture in the view that standard English is the only real language and everything else is degraded. But when students examined their assumptions in the class, they could perceive structures and patterns they hadn't recognized before.

Classroom results reported from Chicago and Georgia were particularly revealing. In Chicago, Taylor (1991) studied student performance across two kinds of college writing classrooms. With one group, she used the traditional English techniques while in the other classroom, she led her students in explicit discovery by contrasting the grammatical patterns of AAVE and SE. The control group, using the correctionist model, showed an 8.5% *increase* in African American features in their writing after 11 weeks, but the experimental group, using a technique called *contrastive analysis,* showed a remarkable 59.3% *decrease* in African American vernacular features. Taylor observed that students had been neither aware of their dialect nor of "grammatical black English features that interfere in their writing" (p. 150). By contrasting the language varieties, students were able to learn the detailed differences between the two, thereby "limit[ing] AAVE intrusions into their SE usage" (Rickford, 1997, p. 4).

The same kind of approach was also implemented by teachers in DeKalb County, Georgia, who helped young speakers of minority dialects explicitly contrast their mother tongue with the standard dialect. Thus, when a fifth grader answered a question with a double negative ("not no more"), the teacher prompted the student to "codeswitch," to which the student replied, "not any more." The children learned to switch from their home speech to school speech at appropriate times and places, and to recognize that "the dialect they might use at home is valuable and 'effective' in that setting, but not for school, for work—or for American democracy" (Cumming, 1997, p. B1). This program has been designated a "center of excellence" by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Rachel Speaks of Her Classroom Journey: Moving from Correction to Contrast

In my third-grade classroom, I noticed that vernacular patterns intruded in many of my students' writings. As a correctionist, I would explain what we do and do not say.

For example, when a student wrote, "the three friend went for a walk," my initial reaction was to correct my student's grammar by explaining the need for an '–s' on the end of plural nouns. But after Rebecca's class, I decided to use a contrastive approach.

The first notion students needed was that language varies (among other things) by formality of situation. To teach this concept, we discussed formal and informal clothing. First, I asked students what kind of clothes they wore to school. Since the school has a fairly strict dress code, the students named permitted clothing such as collared shirts, slacks, and belts. When I asked the students what they liked to wear at home on the weekends, they responded, "jeans, tee shirts, sweatpants, and swimsuits."

We brainstormed places or events that we might attend, aside from school, where more formal clothing was required. The students gave examples such as church, weddings, and graduations. They determined that informal clothing would be more appropriate for playing basketball, watching TV, and going to the pool.

I asked how their language might differ between formal and informal situations. The students explained that "yes, sir" and "excuse me" were formal and that "yo, wa's up?" and "he ain' nobody" were more informal. As we thought back on an exchange between two students in our class, I wrote the following on the board for group discussion.

Student 1: *"Yo, Mz. Swords! Dat junk be* tight*!"*

Student 2: *"McKinzie! You ain sposed ta talk t' Mrs. Swords dat way."*

Clearly, students come to school already having a good grasp of language *style* (the variation language shows in levels of formality) within their own variety, in this case, AAVE. In this way, my students were able to use their own prior knowledge to define formal and informal language.

We applied our understanding to the grammar of sentences. Using chart paper, I created two columns of sentences drawn from my students' own writing with the left one written in standard English ("I have two dogs") and the right showing the same sentences written in the vernacular of many of my students ("I have two dog").

I labeled the SE examples as "formal/written language" and the vernacular examples as "informal/spoken language." We began with plural patterns because I knew that my students would immediately see the difference between the formal and informal usage. By putting SE on the left side, and AAVE on the right, given our left-right reading conventions, I implicitly (and later explicitly) suggested that we might move not only from vernacular to standard, but also from standard to vernacular. Such even-handedness between varieties is crucial.

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We then compared and contrasted the sentences in each column. Immediately, one child said, "Oh, that's wrong. All the ones on that side [informal] are wrong and the ones on the other side [formal] are right." But another child said, "How is it wrong? Mrs. Swords wrote it!" Students were clearly confused. After all, since this was my second year of working with these children, and I had spent more than a year teaching them the right and wrong way to construct a sentence, they couldn't figure out why I would purposely write an incorrect sentence.

To address the students' confusion, I reminded them about our explorations of formal and informal styles of clothing and language. We looked at how language varies by region of the country, and I talked about how I switch my language to suit the setting. For example, I have a rather thick southern accent. At home I might say, "I'm fixin' to go to the store—ya'll need anything?" However, I certainly wouldn't ask my fellow Virginia teachers, "I'm fixin' to make copies—ya'll need any?" I know this language variety is not appropriate at school. Instead, I might say, "I'm going to make some copies. Do you need any?" I talked to the students about how I change my language setting-by-setting and told them that when I make these language choices, I am codeswitching.

To *codeswitch* is to choose the pattern of language appropriate to the context. This is what I want my students to be able to do—choose the language form appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose (Ezarik, 2002). I use a classroom technique called *contrastive analysis* to support children in learning how to codeswitch between informal and formal language patterns (Baugh, 1999; Cumming, 1997; Rickford, 1998; Schierloh, 1991; Taylor, 1991; Wheeler, 2001).

Of course, the contrasts of formal/informal (or written/spoken, or home/school) are oversimplifications of the different ways that language is patterned by variety and style, but the key point I wanted to convey was one of contrast—that different language patterns are appropriate to different contexts. *Formal/informal* was a rough and

ready way to get that notion across with third graders.

Moving back to the chart, I asked the students if they understood what each sentence meant and if the informal sentence, "I have 2 dog," had the same meaning as the formal one, "I have 2 dogs." Again, the class agreed they did, so, I asked, "If we can tell what they mean, what differences do you see between the two columns?"

Since we had previously talked about nouns and pronouns, the children were easily able to articulate responses. One child explained, "In this one [the formal form], the noun has an '–s' on it." I asked, "What does that mean? What is the '–s' doing there?" They said, "It's making it more than one." We talked about how the '–s' makes it more than one. I then explained that this is the way we show "more than one" in formal language (see Figure 1). To help the children, I created a heading for the patterns they were discovering—(how to show "more than one") and wrote the children's observations under the formal column.

Then we looked at the informal example, exploring its patterns. Reminding the children that the examples had the same meaning, I asked how the informal sentence shows us that the number is more than one. One child said, "You know it's more than one because it has the number 'two' in it." So I wrote, "number words" under informal, commenting that "number words show there's more than one." Then we looked at "Taylor likes cat." This sentence is difficult because nothing in the sentence tells the reader that it's more than one cat. The children explained, "You have to look at the whole paragraph." So I wrote, "other words in the paragraph," commenting that "other words in the paragraph show there's more than one." Next we looked at "all the boy are here today." I asked, "What tells you there is more than one boy?" One child replied, "The other words in the sentence—'all'." So, I wrote on our chart, "Other words in the sentence." The children explored and named the contrasts in grammatical patterning between formal and informal language. Our plural chart (along with charts for possessive and tense) stayed up on our classroom walls for easy reference during the school day.

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Plural Patterns

Formal	*Informal*
I have two dogs	I have two dog
Taylor likes cats	Taylor likes cat
All the boys . . .	All the boy . . .
How to show "more than one"	
'-s'	number words
	other words in the paragraph
	in the sentence

Figure 1. Discovering the rules for plural patterns across language varieties

Students Discover Possessive Patterns across Language Varieties

For another lesson, I gave students a chart comparing sentences with formal and informal possessive structures. Figure 2 provides an example, but I always use sentences selected from students' writing.

I wrote the term "possessive" on the board, and asked if the students knew what it meant. If children don't know, I explain that possession means "someone owns something" and provide several examples.

Students looked closely at the underlined words on the chart and worked in small groups to find ways to describe how each language variety expresses ownership. When the entire class reconvened, students shared their responses and constructed a rule for using possessive patterns in the two language varieties. For example, in informal English, possession = owner + owned ('the boy coat'). However, in formal English, possession = owner + 's + owned ('the boy's coat'). Once this rule was determined, students made up additional examples. Through these instructional strategies, we discover the grammatical rules of each language variety.

Language Varieties in Reading and Writing

Like most teachers, I integrate literature into the topics we are currently studying. My interest in using contrastive analysis was reflected in many of my literary selections. One of the first linguistically enriched texts I introduced to my students was *Flossie and the Fox* by Patricia McKissack (1986). In this story, Flossie speaks in the patterns of AAVE while the fox speaks in standard English patterns. This book quickly became a favorite among my students, who chose it for every student-selected read-aloud. I was delighted when at the third reading, without any prompting, children all joined in choral call of one particular line: "Shucks! You aine no fox. You a rabbit, all the time trying to fool me." Kids were *engaged* with this reading.

Directions: Write three more Informal and three more Formal sentences that include possessive patterns. Then answer the questions below.

Possessive Patterns

Informal English	*Formal English*
Taylor cat is black.	Taylor's cat is black.
The boy coat is torn.	The boy's coat is torn.
A giraffe neck is long.	A giraffe's neck is long.
Did you see the teacher pen?	Did you see the teacher's pen?
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What is the rule for using possessive patterns in Informal English?

_____

What is the rule for using possessive patterns in Formal English?

_____

Figure 2: Discovering the rules for possessive patterns across language varieties.

After contrasting several different grammatical patterns and reading literature reflecting differing language varieties, it was time for students to implement their new understandings of language varieties in dialogues within their own writing. I initiated a discussion about how different characters use different speech patterns, and several children mentioned their favorite book, *Flossie and the Fox*. We discussed how the different voices of Flossie and the fox made the book more interesting.

Following the discussion, the class created dialogue for a story we were writing together about a teacher and a giant cockroach. When I asked who would speak in what language style, the students decided the teacher would speak informal English while the cockroach would use formal speech.

After completing several lines of our story, I asked the students to think about the characters in their own stories and decide the speech style each would use. Some had each character speak with formal English, others chose to use informal English for each character, while other students mixed it up as we had done in our collective story.

I have seen tremendous growth in my students' command of language. Prior to teaching codeswitching, my students simply guessed what language form was expected. One student explained, "It's because you don't know how to say it and you're just wondering how you're suppose to say it." My students are now becoming clear about the contrasts between formal and informal language. Students also understand that just as one tool doesn't suit all jobs, neither does one language style suit all communication tasks. Indeed, a well-stocked linguistic toolbox offers a diverse range of language forms to the mature speaker and writer.

Responding to Frequently Asked Questions

Crucially, in our work on codeswitching between language varieties, we are *not* saying, "anything goes." We are not ignoring language, and we are not "making allowances." We pay considerable attention to helping children command the intricacies of choosing the language appropriate to the time, place, audience, and purpose. We are not implying that a child does not need to learn standard English. Indeed, in the broader American society, all children need to command Mainstream American English, the language variety often required in formal settings.

However, the issue of who learns what language is deeply political, rooted in the social and cultural structure of society (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998; Nieto, 2000). It can be a very damaging human experience for an AAVE-speaking child to learn Mainstream American English while the teacher dismisses AAVE as broken and error-filled.

With contrastive analysis, we move to break the cycle. Exercising their analytic eye, the teacher and all students, Black, White, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, alike, engage in critical thinking as they discover and analyze the patterns of diverse language varieties. In doing so, we take steps to unbind the "widespread, destructive myths about language variation" that underlie the dialect prejudice so rampant in society (Wolfram, 1999, p. 78).

Techniques of contrastive analysis also offer students tangible help in interpreting standardized test questions. Students come to understand that when the test asks whether a sentence is "correct" or "incorrect," it is asking for the patterns of the mainstream written language. This vantage helps students know to choose the formal English patterns on test questions. Indeed, as Rickford (1998) observes, "[T]eaching methods which *do* take vernacular dialects into account in teaching the standard work better than those which *do not*" (p. 1).

Codeswitching and knowledge of language varieties serve children during the writing process. As children construct story narrative, they choose a range of language styles to enhance character. When the task is to produce formal English, we make editing into a game. After students have completed the substantive content of their reports, children highlight their successes in matching the patterns of standard English. If students find a sentence still in informal patterns, they change it to formal English, and then highlight the sentence. Students are enthusiastic about noting their grammar successes.

Children's Books That Feature African American Dialects

Clinton, Catherine. *I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry.* Illus. S. Alcorn. (Houghton, 1998).

Twenty-five poets are represented in 35 poems arranged chronologically from the 1700s to the present.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Rennaisance through Poems.* (Holt, 1996).

A collection of poems is accompanied by a commentary about each poet and poem.

Hamilton, Virginia. *Bruh Rabbit and the Tar Baby Girl.* Illus. J. Ransome. (Scholastic, 2003).

This version of the trickster tale was collected in the Gullah speech of the Sea Islands of South Carolina.

Hamilton, Virginia. *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales.* Illus. L. & D. Dillon. (Scholastic, 1995).

Nineteen stories focus on African American women. Comments at the end of each tale explain the time period and the setting.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales.* Illus. L. & D. Dillon. (Knopf, 2000).

Twenty-four tales are now accompanied by a CD narrated by both the author and James Earl Jones.

Hamilton, Virginia. *Tricksters: Animal Tales from America, the West Indies, and Africa.* Illus. B. Moser. (Scholastic, 1997).

Eleven tales show the migration of African culture to America via the West Indies.

hooks, bell. *Happy To Be Nappy.* Illus. C. Raschka. (Hyperion, 1999).

hooks celebrates the joy and beauty of nappy hair. Also see *Be Boy Buzz* by hooks.

Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave.* Illus. T. Feelings. (Puffin, 1968).

In this compilation of oral histories, slaves and ex-slaves tell about their experiences.

Lester, Julius. *Uncle Remus: The Complete Tales.* Illus. J. Pinkney. (Dial, 1999).

Lester uses "modified contemporary southern black English, a combination of standard English and black English" to bring these rollicking tales to a new generation of readers.

McKissack, Patricia. *Flossie & the Fox.* Illus R. Isadora. (Dial, 1986).

A smooth talking, egg-stealing fox meets his match when he encounters Flossie who is on an errand to deliver a basket of eggs.

Parks, Van Dyke (adapter). *Jump.* Illus. B. Moser. (Harcourt, 1989).

Parks tells more lively adventures of Brer Rabbit. Two other books, *Jump On Over!* and *Jump Again* by the adapter and illustrator feature other stories about Brer Rabbit.

Smalls, Irene. *Don't Say Ain't.* Illus. C. Bootman. (Charlesbridge, 2003).

In the 1950s when a Harlem girl gets the chance to go to an integrated school, her teacher singles her out for using "improper" speech.

Steptoe, John. *Creativity.* Illus. E. B. Lewis. (Clarion, 1997).

Charlie helps a new boy adjust to school and learns about how people can speak differently and share a common ancestry. Also see *Stevie* by Steptoe.

—Marilyn Carpenter

Further, students show an increased conscious command of standard English as well as the ability to codeswitch. David, an African American student, wrote "Spy Mouse and the Broken Globe," a story in which Spy Mouse spoke informally ("I won't do nothin' to you"), while David's author's note used uniquely formal English patterns. By explaining that *he* knew formal English but Spy Mouse did not, David was able to independently articulate the reasons for his language choices, an impressive accomplishment for any student, let alone an urban third grader.

Conclusion

Our schools have long served a dialectally diverse population. We received a wake-up call more than 20 years ago when a northern school system was sued for educational malpractice. In 1979, "Michigan Legal services filed suit . . . on behalf of fifteen black, economically deprived children residing in a low-income housing project" (Smitherman, 1981, p. 133). Their case, *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board,* resulted in a decision for the plaintiffs. The court found that the suit had merit since federal law directed that "no child should be deprived of equal educational opportunity because of the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers" (Labov, 1995, p. 46). The issue still before us today is *how* to take "appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers."

Rachel has taken appropriate action. Her students have come alive. While their engagement and excitement with learning hold center stage, test results are also revealing. After just one year of using a contrastive approach, her black and white children performed equally well on year-end benchmarks. Indeed, in math and science, African American children outperformed European American children.

We believe that a pluralist response to language varieties holds promise for enhancing student performance and positively transforming the language arts classroom. The reasons for student productivity are complex. Not simply, or even perhaps primarily, a matter of fostering children's decoding and production of standard English, the crucial point may be that when we bring the child's language and culture into the classroom, we invite in the *whole* child. Doing so contributes signally to "the trellis of our profession—and the most crucial element of school culture . . . —an ethos hospitable to the promotion of human learning" (Barth, 2002, p. 11). In this fashion, codeswitching and contrastive analysis offer potent tools of language and culture for transforming language arts practice in America.

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