To Correct or Not Correct: Confronting Decisions about African American Students’ Use of Language Varieties in the English Classroom

“Well—now when I think about language in terms of them it’s literally speaking in proper grammar . . .”

“But you know when we’re just chatting I’m just like let your freak vibe fly.”

These are real words from real teachers spoken during interviews from a qualitative study on the influence of language, culture, and power on how teachers plan instruction for high-achieving African American (HA-A) students. Findings from this study raise real questions and present implications for how teachers think about language and culture and use their instructional power to direct and control how students use language in the classroom. Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford characterize language as a product and a tool (138). Students’ use of language in the classroom is a product demonstrating content knowledge and a tool for communication with their peers and teachers. Those students who use language varieties other than what is known as “correct English” or Standard English often find themselves caught in the crosshairs of teachers’ beliefs about language and their use of power to control their speech. This is particularly significant with many African American students who use what has become known as Black American English (BAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which has been the subject of much interest, research, and controversy (Smitherman). The racial underpinnings associated with the use of BAE/AAVE have created a challenge for teachers, often revealing hidden cultural and racial biases leading students to question their identity and place within the classroom.

Teachers’ belief systems about language create the decisions to allow students to move freely between language varieties or whether they are forced to adhere to what is believed to be fixed rules for speech and written expression.

English Varieties

To more fully grasp the intersection between teachers’ beliefs about English and the decisions they make for students necessitates a brief outline of how American English came to be and dominate the current lexical landscape. American English or what is often characterized as Standard American English (SAE) has come to be viewed as the dominant form of language expected to be spoken at school, most certainly in English classrooms. Elementary-aged students are taught the rules of speech and written expression. When students bring different varieties of English to the classroom, particularly BAE/AAVE, teachers have a decision to make. Do they demonstrate a willingness to understand the connections between language, culture, and identity allowing students to “let their freak vibe fly”? Do they demonstrate linguistic “purism” and require students to speak “proper grammar”? Do they offer students an opportunity to make connections between the ways BAE and SAE correlate and offer students pathways toward deeper understanding of how these two varieties of English shape their understanding of content? The decisions teachers make represent their beliefs, and their use of instructional power influences how these beliefs direct students’ behavior.
The English language has always varied. Unfortunately, teachers often possess little to no knowledge about the origins of American English as its own form of a language variety. This lack of knowledge has created the false idea that American English is a pure form of speech and writing. As America became a nation, a varied form of British English was developed and used to establish a national identity (Devereaux). Language became an essential tool as America established itself as a nation separate from Great Britain. Shirley B. Heath explained that founder John Adams proposed “the United States consider seriously the social and linguistic consequences of spreading English around the World” (221). In spreading English around the world, Adams believed it was necessary to determine a model of American English (AE) that would establish it as identifiable to America and it should be prescribed. Adams further believed American English should be prescribed through specific rules of grammar and usage. His model set the stage for what has become Standard American English. By creating a standard for the rules governing American English, Adams pushed forward a framework for understanding the American identity. Because teachers tend to lack knowledge about the origins of American English, they create hostile environments for students whose language varieties do not match the rules governing Standard American English.

While Adams created an American identity through a variation on British English, political philosopher Frances Lieber advanced the idea that varieties of American English would emerge across groups and regions (Heath 225). America became a nation with a unique brand of English, structured around a set of rules while simultaneously including inbred variations. Although regionality, context, and situation governed the communicative interactions, the idea of American English being rule fixed overshadowed the concept of the naturally occurring variances. The fixed structures in AE governed grammar with specific rules controlling written and spoken expression. As AE spread throughout the world, its grammar and structures formed the language of power, which signified group membership and excluded those who did not adhere to its forms. America’s language of power is the system within which many students, especially African American students, are schooled.

A Tale of Two Decisions

Understanding the tensions of English and language in the classroom lies in the framework of the history outlined in the previous section. Situating the complexities of how African American students encounter English in the secondary English classroom intersects the ongoing deficit thinking about African American students as learners and African Americans as marginalized citizens in the United States, which is grounded in the racial dynamics of America. Language in the classroom fits within the cultural systems and struggles alive in society. African American students continue to face teachers’ decisions about the meaning of their use of English. Here I share a tale of two visions for how teachers’ beliefs on how students should use language in the classroom create dilemmas for student identity and reveal hidden biases associated with a value system and ignorance about the school-sanctioned brand of American English. The teachers discussed here are White females, teaching in predominantly African American schools.

Correctionist Framework

I interviewed teachers for a study about high-achieving African American students and teachers’ planning around language, culture, and power in the secondary English classroom. My study revealed teachers have distinct viewpoints about how their African American high-achieving students should use language in the classroom. One teacher, Amy, held firmly to the idea students should speak in “proper grammar.” By proper she specifically explained, “I don’t want them, like the ‘we was . . .’ and ‘they was . . .’ and improper grammar like ‘mines’” (Marshall 105). Furthermore, Amy believed she was fighting a losing battle in getting her students to “speak correctly” because many of her colleagues spoke “incorrectly” just like her students. In believing there was a definitive right and wrong way to speak, Amy adopted a “correctionist model” (Devereaux 2) and required her students to rephrase their speech every time she heard “improper” English. There was no room for a variation on the Standard American English theme, which she wholeheartedly believed and trusted to be true. Students were held to the principles of English many learn in school—subjects and verbs agree and “mine” is already possessive; therefore, adding the “s” at the
end is incorrect and must be corrected. The decision to correct or not correct was clear—Correct! With Amy, students’ home language was not welcomed in the lexical environment of the classroom. Additionally, the way adolescents experiment with language to try on identities was seemingly misunderstood and devalued for personal expression. She, as do many English/language arts teachers, held to a fixed way of thinking about English.

The proper English belief system required students to make decisions of their own. Do they comply with the “proper English” demands, which would result in race- and identity-shelving (Marshall 205)? Do they challenge the system and use their varieties of English? I define race-shelving as the recognition of race and the use of power to mitigate its presence by requiring the temporary putting aside of behaviors most associated with a particular race, in this case how language is used in speech and/or writing, and an adoption of behaviors associated with the dominant culture. Like race-shelving, identity-shelving involves the recognition that individual identity is shaped by factors such as race and the use of power to require a temporary putting aside of racially ascribed elements of an identity believed to be objectionable or personally offensive. Herein lies a critical dilemma between teachers’ beliefs about how students should speak and what it means when students do not conform to the ideas in their heads.

Amy’s quest to ensure students sounded educated because they were in school and in an advanced language arts classroom did more than teach the structures of Standard English. She engaged in cultural warfare, which stripped her students’ ability to learn about English in relation to how they understood and used English. Her ideals about the way students should speak depicted a “linguistic inferiority principle” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 6) revealing a hidden bias against the use and value of AAVE. By employing a correctionist model in her classroom, Amy demonstrated a lack of cultural understanding, which translated into a linguistically and culturally hostile environment.

Language Fluidity

Marie, another interviewee, had a completely different idea about how students should use language in the classroom. She demonstrated an understanding of the natural variations in the English language. Marie believed when students were interacting with her and their peers informally, they should be free to “let their freak vibe fly” (Marshall 102) and use the form of English with which they felt most comfortable—with no profanity. When students were engaged in content-based discussions and working on in-class writing assignments, the expectation was for them to use discipline-specific vocabulary and formal structures of English. Students had to choose English variations and allow situation, purpose, and audience to dictate the form of “best fit” (Devereaux 109). Students’ speech was not corrected and they did not have to choose sides—so to speak—about how best to express themselves or their content knowledge. The environment was infused with a mixture of English representative of the cultural dynamism of her students and their culture.

This ability to allow students linguistic freedom spoke to a different set of beliefs than Amy. While Marie learned about English as many of us do—there is a right and wrong way to speak and write—she understood her students naturally used English variations. Marie did not equate her students’ use of language variations with their intelligence or right to be in an advanced English course. By giving her students room to be their linguistically cultural selves, Marie affirmed her students’ culture, which created a culturally affirming environment that sustained culture and presented opportunities for cultural relevancy. Language is a part of a cultural system and varies naturally according to situations and purposes (Gee). Marie’s understanding of this principle was as significant as Amy’s seeming lack of understanding as they both represented a current dilemma in how English teachers should and can approach students’ language use in the classroom.

Language, Culture, and Power

Power is fixed, yet fluid, and ever-present in every relationship. The intersection of language, culture, and the dynamic of power manifests the moment students and teachers arrive at school. By design, teachers and students have different levels of power. Therefore, how teachers use their power to direct students’ use of language signals their beliefs and hidden biases about their students’ cultures and language. When teachers harbor inferiority
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principles about students’ language coupled with a fixed notion of how English operates, their use of power can constrain and be an oppressive force within the classroom. Such was the case with Amy. Although she would not name her actions as oppressive or shrouded with racially and culturally ascribed deficit thinking, her actions spoke loudly enough. Speaking specifically about the type of language her students were not allowed to use signaled Amy’s area of focus. Although Amy’s stated intentions were to prepare her students for the next level of their schooling, her actions sent two messages. First, her students erroneously learned English is fixed with a singular form of expression. Second and most important, her students learned their form of English was wrong and needed to be fixed.

Contrast Marie’s language perspectives with Amy’s, and a picture of possibilities emerges. Marie recognized she and her students spoke formal and informal English varieties. She offered her students a way to learn content and acquire skills using both school-sanctioned English and their unique variations of English; there was nothing to correct. Even when challenged by her students to adopt their forms of speech, Marie pushed back defending her own uses of English sharing:

I’m like so . . . That’s good for you. Jus—Just like it’s good for me to hear . . . you speak and . . . how you speak, I’m learning—I’m learning different things about the culture just by listening to you guys speak . . . about how you guys speak and how you’ve learned to use language. And that’s how I learned to use language. And I’m not going to change the way I speak for you because this is part of what makes me—me. And that’s part of what makes you—you. (Marshall 104)

Marie’s use of more formal structures of English was not thrust upon her students. She used her students’ form of English as a tool for learning, not for correcting or erasing. Recognizing the relationship between language and culture served as a mechanism for mutuality instead of domination. Allowing her students to bring their racially cultured selves to class while she brought her racially cultured self to the class created a respectful and understanding classroom. Instead of using her instructional power as a weapon to advance an erroneous dominant culture understanding about the English language, Marie affirmed the linguistic culture of her students while expecting and demanding they do the same for her.

To Correct or Not

Is there such a thing as correct English and should students learn it? Research on linguistics has proven there is no such thing as “correct” English. Research has further proven English is regionally situated and culturally and socially variant. Lisa Delpit, Michelle Devereaux, Mary Ehrenworth, Sonja Nieto, and others have championed the need for linguistically and culturally marginalized students to learn Standard English—the language of power. In discussions with my interviewees, it was clear teachers made instructional choices based on their beliefs and knowledge, which influenced responses to the language their students brought to school. Amy believed that since students were in school, they should sound intelligent and professional. She went as far as to say she challenged her students by asking them, “are you gonna say that in an interview, like how unprofessional do you look” (Marshall 105). Unknown to Amy was her own use of an English variation. In questioning how her students would speak, she seemed not to recognize that “gonna” is its own English variation of “go.” Her own use of casual English went unheard while she forced a strict use of formal English forms onto her students. In saying this statement to her students, Amy echoed Michael Stubbs’s observation that “we hear language through a powerful filter of social values and stereotypes” (66). There was a clear filter applied to Amy’s understanding about the way her students spoke relative to how she spoke. She and her students used varying forms of American English; however, hers was valued above theirs and she made it known. In so doing, Amy required her students to conform to her standards of speech based on the values and stereotypes she harbored.

As a White teacher of majority Black students, the tensions are obvious. The stereotypes and values were clear. Students’ language was viewed through a prism of race and power, in the form of constant correction, and was used to ensure socially acceptable forms of English were spoken. The teaching population remains predominately White and female while the percentages of students of color are
increasing; therefore, the lens White teachers bring to the classroom regarding the English dialects students use is more important than ever. Standard English is unquestionably the language of power and students should be conversant and proficient in it. The question becomes, How do teachers address the very real need for students to learn SAE while affirming the language variations their students bring to and use outside of school? How do English teachers deal with the tensions they may have with hearing American English in a more expansive light when everything they’ve learned says American English is the standard-bearer of what it means to speak correctly, anchor an American identity, and be valued in society? Correction is necessary, however, only as it advances learning, not as a means for social and cultural domination. The differences between Amy’s and Marie’s responses to students’ language varieties in the classroom represent the influence of teachers’ beliefs about language on their instructional decisions.

**English Variations as Learning Tools**

“These kids can’t write.” “These kids can’t speak.”

I’ve heard these statements and others like them from teachers across the country. Devereaux offers a way of fostering language learning in *Teaching about Dialect Variation and Language in Secondary English Classrooms: Power, Prestige, and Prejudice*. In it, she advances the idea that students should be engaged in linguistic analyses of Standard English and other English variations such as AAVE. Students should see both forms side-by-side to conduct structural analysis to determine the governing rules of each form. Doing so provides students with the opportunity to see English as a naturally varying form of communicating governed by situation, audience, and purpose (Devereaux; Gee). Additionally, having the opportunity to analyze English through the lens of natural variance fosters an appreciation for instead of adopting a devaluing of the ways in which different groups bridge culture and speech. This bridging applies to written expression as well. The authors that teachers choose to expose their students to use language strategically, and students need to develop the capacity to see the English language in all its variant splendor.

The opportunity to learn and (re)vision English in the classroom lies within the texts we hold dear. While Shakespeare, Hurston, Lee, and Hughes grace the desks of many advanced secondary students, the teaching remains focused on themes, literary devices, and other traditional ways of teaching novels. Fostering a deeper understanding about English can be forged through the use of these texts as windows into language as cultural identifiers. Consider Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While this is a tale of a woman actualizing and challenging the status quo about womanhood, it is also a study in how language shaped a culture and identified a people. While students grapple with understanding Janie’s character amid the struggle of becoming a woman on her own terms, they must also be challenged to see her language as an essential part of her cultural make-up, not a broken form of English—something to be made fun of or skipped over because students cannot pronounce the words. Not only do the words themselves have significance, the structure and rules of Janie’s language are part of the character interactions throughout the book.

As Hurston moves between narration and character speech, students glimpse the differences between Janie’s dialect and the SAE used to fill the story (see Figure 1). Hurston’s use of dialect offers

### FIGURE 1. Janie’s Speech and Hurston’s Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Janie’s Speech</th>
<th>Hurston’s Narration</th>
<th>Questions for Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>You ain’t done me no favor in marryin’ me. And if that’s what you call yo’self doin’, I don’t thank yuh for it.</em></td>
<td>Janie turned from the door without answering and stood in the middle of the floor without knowing it.</td>
<td>1. What do you notice about Janie’s and Hurston’s words?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. What is significant about the structure of Janie’s words?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Based on the structure of Janie’s words, describe the rules governing her speech.</td>
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students a chance to see the relationships between language and culture while at the same time recognizing the purposeful use of SAE. Studying English in this way gives students an opportunity to vision English as part of a system of interaction, “inseparable from an attention to the transactions between individuals and cultures” (Stewart 284). Such an analysis moves students from considering English as a standard and nonstandard binary toward English as “existing on a continuum” (Devereaux 106) shaped by such factors as situation, purpose, and audience. When students have opportunities to see the English language as naturally fluid, they can recognize their own use of grammar, syntax, and accent as valuable tools for written and spoken expression.

Conclusion

Culture and language are inseparable markers of students’ identities. The practices teachers use to bring the variations of English into the classroom reveal a great deal about their knowledge, understanding, and more importantly their beliefs about the English language. It is imperative teachers develop skills necessary to embrace the naturally fluid forms of English while equipping students with the skills to recognize and employ the best form of English when needed, which creates only opportunities.

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**Works Cited**


**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

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Writers often use dialects to paint an authentic portrait of the location or time period about which they are writing. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is an excellent example of a text that is successfully and eloquently written in dialect. Unfortunately, many students find it inaccessible because they are unfamiliar with the concept of dialects and do not know how to read a book that is written in this way. Students begin this lesson by listening to examples of several dialects and discuss what they learn about each speaker from the recordings. As a class, students come up with a definition of the word dialect and continue to examine its use in Walker’s novel. The lesson fosters further interaction with the text using written reflections in double-entry journals and peer-to-peer discussions in literature circles. http://bit.ly/2CxPRTI