

Shibboleth*

What can you do as a teacher to address your student's various varieties of language?

"Languages are bundles of dialects." – John McWhorter

"Judging from the past we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity." – Charles Darwin

The idea is not to negate or make students feel that their variety of speaking is sub-standard or on un-equal footing with Standard American English. Rather, teachers should encourage students to love (and be proud of) the language they speak at home and with their friends, but also recognize the importances of being "language ambidextrous." This way, the students are empowered with two languages. Just as ambidextrous students can write with either the left or right hand, bilingual students can speak in two different languages depending on the situation. They can adapt their language to any social situation they find themselves in. Although there is no such thing as a "Standard" language – this is the label that we give to the language spoken by the media and in most business correspondence. It is important to recognize that we agree on one common language in order to communicate effectively via government and commerce. However, this does not mean that other varieties of speaking are sub-standard, they are just different. Some students may be sensitive to the word "dialect" as it can carry a negative connotation. In fact, from a scientific, linguistic point of view, there is no such thing as "dialect." When discussing AAVE, you may want to substitute "dialect" with "variety."

When teachers try to constantly correct student's variety of speaking by telling them their way of speaking is "wrong", this disempowers the child and injures the student's self-confidence. John McWhorter explains, "When you correct relentlessly – children clam up in fear and shame – turned off from the joy of learning and achievement." It is important that teachers recognize African American Vernacular English as a variation of language and not as degradation. AAVE does not incorporate bad grammar; rather, it incorporates alternate grammar. AAVE is not a denigrated language spoken by a dispossessed group. Language is intrinsically tied to identity and when a teacher "puts down" a student's language the teacher is essentially "putting down" the student as a person and as a human being.

After the Oakland Resolution, many schools instituted dialect readers, translation exercises and contrastive analysis/drills. In his book *Word on the Street*, John McWhorter argues that these techniques did not work because they treat SAE as a "party trick" or something "other" that is alien to the students. Students may end up resisting SAE out of resentment and disaffection and ultimately deny SAE in order to rebel against "mainstream" society. McWhorter believes that students learn language on a sub-conscious level; therefore, it is important that teachers incorporate a great deal of SAE without consciously emphasizing that the students are learning SAE. It is also important to incorporate a diverse canon of literature in English/Language Arts class in order to allow the students to appreciate and value a variety of literature written in various languages. Although "classics" are important, it is also important that the students are exposed to various writing styles and authors that represent diverse backgrounds. Students need opportunities to *relate* to what they are reading.

William Labov states that the major cause of reading failure is “cultural and political conflict in the classroom.” Socioeconomic disparity and psychological disinclusion play major roles in the reading failure of black students. Language is closely tied to status, power and privilege. Many students are afraid of living up to a “stereotype threat” and may retreat from learning a new language so as to not fulfill the “stereotype of failure.”

It is important for teachers to acknowledge and remember the following:

1. There is no such thing as a society lapsing into using unclear or illogical speech
2. Start from where the student is (Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development). Build on student’s knowledge.
3. Recognize that every student is already a master of his/her native language.
4. We are ALL on the SAME level in the arena of native language.
5. There is no way to rank language, grammar, expressiveness or accuracy of communication.
6. Recognize that language, identity and self-esteem are all intrinsically intertwined.
7. There are no dialects which hinder logical thought.
8. Language change is not decay.
9. No language has ever been recorded as grinding itself down to dust.
10. Language is an ever-changing, living organism.
11. Humans are creatures of habit and are often resistant to change.
12. ALL languages contain coherency and complexity.
13. Language is influenced socially, historically, politically (particularly political oppression) and geographically.
14. Renewal complements erosion; therefore, a language cannot erode because it will always be in a state of renewal.
15. ALL languages are eternally self-sustaining.
16. Cannot predict the changes in language.
17. Language itself will not allow genuine unclear usages to become prelevant.

The most useful analogy to keep in mind is John McWhorter’s description that language is like a lava lamp. He explains:

The “lava” slowly swirls and clumps and rises and falls in its fluid in an eternal, mesmerizing flow. Although constantly changing, in no sense is the clump of lava decaying – if one piece is beginning to drip or split into strands, we can be sure that a few inches away, other pieces are joining together. At any given point, we do not see the present configuration of the lava clump as somehow “better” than the one thirty seconds ago – the joy is in the infinite variations that the clump can take while at all times remaining constant in its expressive motility. (19)

*Shibboleth is language usage of one’s regional and/or social origins used to identify members of one’s own or of another group. Borrowed from Biblical Hebrew; refers to the story in the Book of Judges 12:5-6 in which *shibboleth* was used by the Gileadites as a password to identify the Ephraimites by their dialectical pronunciation.