

2012

Teaching "correct" English: Codeswitching between standard American and vernacular English

Kaia-Marie Bishop
Eastern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/honors>

Recommended Citation

Bishop, Kaia-Marie, "Teaching "correct" English: Codeswitching between standard American and vernacular English" (2012). *Senior Honors Theses & Projects*. 320.
<https://commons.emich.edu/honors/320>

This Open Access Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses & Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

Teaching "correct" English: Codeswitching between standard American and vernacular English

Abstract

Prevalent methods for teaching the grammar of the English language use the traditional approach of correcting vernacular English to Standard American English (SAE). But is this the best practice? Despite this approach, students still struggle with grammar. It is believed that the direct approach guides students towards a "better" English, but SAE is neither better nor worse than vernacular English. Dialects of English are merely different ways to speak and each have appropriate uses. Research suggests that in order to better teach English, we must lead students to compare SAE and vernacular English. However, SAE is valuable our society, so students should still learn it. However, they must also learn about linguistic prejudices, the nature of language changes, and codeswitching.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

English Language and Literature

First Advisor

Dr. Veronica Grodona

TEACHING "CORRECT" ENGLISH:
CODESWITCHING BETWEEN STANDARD AMERICAN
AND VERNACULAR ENGLISH

By

Kaia-Marie Bishop

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Language, Literature and Writing

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April 18, 2012

Teaching "Correct" English: Codeswitching Between
Standard American and Vernacular English

Kaia-Marie Bishop

Eastern Michigan University

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction	3
Valuing SAE	5
Grammar	5
Grammar and Culture.....	7
My Experiences.....	8
Method	9
Results	10
Discussion.....	11
Authority and Freedom.....	15
Power and Other People’s Children	18
Critical Literacy.....	22
A Social Problem.....	24
Grammar Rants.....	26
Literature Review: Wheeler and Swords	27
Culture and Discrimination	31
Conclusion	34
Bibliography	36

ABSTRACT

Prevalent methods for teaching the grammar of the English language use the traditional approach of correcting vernacular English to Standard American English (SAE). But is this the best practice? Despite this approach, students still struggle with grammar. It is believed that the direct approach guides students towards a "better" English, but SAE is neither better nor worse than vernacular English. Dialects of English are merely different ways to speak and each have appropriate uses. Research suggests that in order to better teach English, we must lead students to compare SAE and vernacular English. However, SAE is valuable our society, so students should still learn it. However, they must also learn about linguistic prejudices, the nature of language changes, and codeswitching.

INTRODUCTION

My grammar and language use have been corrected by others for my entire life. My parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and even my word processor all correct my English. My experience is not unusual, either. In "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction," Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia A. Dunn write that traditional grammar instruction is "...the kind of grammar instruction in which students are exposed to lists of 'the rules' of 'proper' or 'good' grammar and are expected to produce writing that fits within those constraints" (71). This practice of correcting language crept into my own habits and I began mindlessly correcting others—until I took a class in Modern English Grammar. In that class, I learned about Standard American English and

linguistic perspectives on changes in and dialects of language. By correcting others' language, we believe that we are guiding them towards a "better" English, towards Standard American English (SAE). However, I was unaware that even linguists do not agree on what SAE means, and they definitely would not agree that by learning SAE and its grammar, a person would be *improving* their English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a standard language as "...that variety of a spoken or written language of a country or other linguistic area which is generally considered the most correct and acceptable form, as **Standard English, Standard American**, etc. [emphasis in the original]." Really though, the United States is such a large and diverse country that it contains many linguistic areas—and people do not always live in "their" linguistic area. This means that all these groups of people see SAE in a different way and, therefore, see different varieties of language as being nonstandard.

So, if the definition of SAE depends on what individuals believe and on their cultural preconceptions of various dialects (a particular way a group speaks), then *the* SAE is actually arbitrary. However, I think it is still possible to be aware of a shared SAE, even if it is an inexact SAE. Our current teaching method of "correcting" dialectal English to SAE is not working, especially when it is taken into consideration that not all students have significant experience with SAE and not all students value it because of their cultures. Some cultures oppose "the values of the school system, which [is] seen as the particular possession and expression of the dominant white society" (Labov, "Literacy").

VALUING SAE

All students have reason to value SAE, however. Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords write that knowing SAE gives students “the linguistic tools needed for success in our broader society” (473). Not only will students need to know SAE in various settings in order to successfully interact within the majority culture and with some other subcultures, but also, SAE is important to know when one is being educated. First, SAE is used in most classrooms in instruction and in student work. Second, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been adopted by Michigan and 44 other states, require that students be able to communicate using written and spoken SAE. Third, standardized tests are written using SAE; many students will have to take some sort of standardized test in their lives. Instead of being taught about these language variations, students are left unaware of them, at least explicitly, and are taught that the way they know how to speak, the language of their culture and identity, is wrong. A new strategy would not approach language as “anything goes,” but would rather help students “command the intricacies of choosing the language appropriate to the time, place, audience, and purpose” (Wheeler and Swords 477) so students have command of SAE and are able to effectively use it when appropriate. Teachers and students should also build a common definition of grammar, particularly if that is to be a focus of leading students to learn SAE.

GRAMMAR

Grammar has a variety of definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides some of these multiple definitions for grammar, including defining it as

“the system of inflexions and syntactical usages characteristic of a language” and as “an individual’s manner of using grammatical forms,” adding that “speech or writing [is] judged as good or bad...as it conforms to or violates grammatical rules.” So, grammar is a system used to describe the different parts of a language and how those parts work together, and speech and writing are seen as correct based on these rules. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *language* as “the system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc.” So when linguists study grammar and language, they are merely examining the *structure* of a system and *that* system, without making impossible and unnecessary comparisons with other language systems. The study of linguistics does not make value judgments about language, because it looks at continuously changing linguistic features. These features are neither good nor bad, but simply something inherent in language.

However, “traditional grammar instruction can encourage distorted views of how language works...[and] can help to perpetuate cultural prejudices regarding class and race that are mirrored in what is often referred to as the difference between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ or between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ language use” (Lindblom and Dunn). When SAE grammar is taught with the idea that there is “correct” and “incorrect” usage, we help perpetuate the teaching of cultural prejudices. Obviously, since many of the people in my life have corrected my language so that it more closely matches SAE, the cultures I am a part of see value in SAE. In order for me to appear credible to these people and in situations with similar people, it is then valuable for me to be able to use SAE

them. However, it is not always appropriate for me to use SAE. In some situations, it can even be detrimental to the situation or to my relationships for me to use SAE, because not all groups of people value SAE at all times—and they may not see value in it at all.

GRAMMAR AND CULTURE

Dominant cultures are the ones that establish the languages, religions, behaviours, and values that are the norms in our societies. This dominant culture is one that controls social institutions connected to communication, education, business, and politics, and it tends to suppress other cultures and subcultures, whether intentionally or not. Since the dominant culture in the United States values SAE and discredits the use of any vernacular English or “improper” English, it seems that being able to use the standard language when appropriate would be beneficial for people who are not a part of the dominant culture. By using SAE, these people will be able to appear more credible to the dominant culture—the culture in power—that has some level of control over these minority groups. Since we live in a democracy that values equality, we should strive towards a communication process that allows for equality for all people. Ideally, our culture as a whole would realize that the traditional view of grammar is bigoted, is a long process and not immediately possible. After students understand that the traditional approach perpetuates prejudice, but that it should still be valued, students need to know how to speak SAE, but it should be taught more effectively than SAE grammar is traditionally taught.

MY EXPERIENCES

In order to understand why I believe the correction approach will never work, it is important to understand how I see public education. While my own experiences with grammar and school initiated my concerns with traditional methods for teaching SAE, there are a number of other reasons for my unease. First, and probably most importantly, the classes that I have taken on education have strongly influenced my teaching philosophy. Because we live in a democratic society, I wholeheartedly support democratic education, which I will define in my discussion. My experiences with my peers in education classes, along with their views on English education, have left me disillusioned and frustrated with future English educators.

Secondly, I am currently completing my student teaching and I am uncomfortable with how negative the interactions between teacher and student become when the teacher “corrects” a student’s language use. I am student teaching in a fairly well off district, with mostly students and staff from the dominant culture. However, they have recently begun to get a number of students from other races and classes moving into the district. These new students have trouble getting acclimated into the school’s dominant culture. However, the teachers have difficulty understanding their troubles and that those troubles are likely because of cultural differences, so they are left unable or unwilling to help.

Thirdly, I will soon begin a Master’s program in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory in order to examine the political dynamics of culture. Because of

the political nature of education, and my strong belief and interest in education, democracy, and equality, I am disenchanted by the traditional approach to SAE grammar.

All of these experiences have caused me to question the traditional approach to SAE grammar. Even if we ignore all of the faults I have previously mentioned regarding this traditional teaching, we cannot ignore the fact that students continue struggle with SAE grammar, despite being provided with instruction in it. While many believe that the traditional approach guides students towards a “better” English, this is untrue. So, what does work? What effects does traditional teaching of SAE grammar have on student learning? What effect does it have on the relationship between teacher and student? What other consequences does it have? Assuming that these are negative effects, and that there is some value in knowing SAE, how can teachers change their approach to teaching SAE so that it is a more beneficial and positive experience for students?

METHOD

In order to answer these questions and to learn about teaching SAE while keeping culture and prejudice in mind, I decided to do a conceptual literature review because it would best enable me to discover and understand the general ideas in the field, while still answering my questions. I planned to collect different approaches educators use when teaching grammar with culture and prejudice in mind, and what effect those different approaches seem to have on student learning. In order to do this, I found prominent researchers studying SAE and dialectal English in the classroom and looked at their work. While looking

through this research, I used what was most relevant for my research. This I hoped would provide me with potential solutions so that I will better understand how to approach teaching SAE in my future classrooms. I also planned to share my findings with anyone else who is even remotely involved in the field of education. Because the concept of SAE affects everyone in our society in some way, my findings will be important for more than just educators. Ultimately, I would like my research to help develop an education system that creates and supports linguistic and cultural equality in our society.

RESULTS

Through analysis of representative literature in the field of English education, I uncovered three major approaches that can be used to teach SAE more effectively: language awareness, codeswitching, and avoiding the teaching of SAE in isolation. Each of these require an understanding of how people perceive language use, an understanding of language appropriateness, and requires students to see meaning and usefulness in what they are learning. However, I also learned that the theoretical framework of these approaches rely on a democratic model of education. Therefore, the next section will include an examination of the purpose of English education, of the place of freedom and authority in education, of cultural and linguistic prejudice, and will include literature reviews of works by Lisa Delpit, William Labov, Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia A. Dunn, and Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords.

DISCUSSION

First, to answer my questions, I must look at the purpose of education and of English education. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) say that their purpose, and therefore what they see as the purpose of education, is to “prepare students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and careers” and to prepare students “to succeed in our global economy and society.” The National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) mission statement says that in education, promote “...the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public works and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.” NCTE values writing, literature, integrated language arts, diversity, knowledgeable and caring teachers, advocacy, and public education, while CCSS emphasizes student preparation for college and career. Since I am focusing on SAE, looking at the Conference on English Education (CEE) Position Statement shows us more specifically what English educators’ goals should be focused on. It says that

Central to the task of English educators is the preparation and support of teachers who, in turn, prepare learners to be creative, literate individuals; contributors to the cultural, social, and economic health of their communities; and fully participating and critically aware citizens of our democracy in a complex, diverse, and increasingly globalized world.

This shows us that the CEE support education that prepares students to be literate and to participate as citizens in a democracy.

Finally, since we live in a democracy and these institutions seem to point to democratic education, the Institute for Democratic Education in America's (IDEA) mission shows us the goals of democratic education. IDEA's "mission is to ensure that all young people can engage meaningfully with their education and gain the tools to build a just, democratic, and sustainable world" through democratic education, which is "learning that equips every human being to participate fully in a healthy democracy." Essentially, in a democratic education, students should be provided with the right tools to participate in a just and democratic society.

So, based on what these three institutions say about education, we can assume that the purpose of education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for college, careers, literacy, equality, and autonomy in order to fully participate in our democratic society. The best way to prepare students to be these critical and active citizens who can shape and govern their democratic society is through democratic education.

Democratic education involves becoming knowing citizens, and in that process, students are forming, changing, growing and redirecting themselves. In order to do this, they need to examine relationships among ideas and critically analyze society, in order to examine and change social inequalities. Education should empower students to be critical, autonomous, and active citizens who will shape and govern society. In these schools, freedom and authority coexist, but freedom is *not* standardization, prejudice, or discrimination. For example, freedom does not give a person the freedom to say or do whatever, because if it

negatively impacts another's freedom, then this is no longer truly about equality and is undemocratic.

It is also important to appreciate and learn from differences in this type of education. Democratic education should help students develop autonomy, and through dialogue and interaction, students should produce their own knowledge. Knowledge is not information transferred from teacher to student. This way, students will connect knowledge from school with knowledge from other sources and it will become more pertinent and valuable. Students should use this knowledge, critical literacy, and their analysis skills to critically look at themselves and how they relate to society. It is also important that theory and practice are not separated so that the relationship between theory and practice can be more easily understood. This means that the theory of democracy and the practice of democracy should not be separated in the classroom. Democratic education leads to the empowerment of *all* students.

IDEA sums up the goal of democratic education by saying that

The goal of democratic education is to empower young people to be autonomous, responsible members of their community and the larger world. Democratic education is rooted in meaningful challenge to the learner, while also being responsive and relevant to the larger community. It celebrates the adventure of learning, while cultivating personal and social responsibility. It helps individuals and communities find their voices.

A democracy is a system in which the people have power and are able to exercise it. Democratic education incorporates the principles of a

healthy democracy: students have an active role in shaping their own learning, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. They are participants and citizens, each with unique gifts, not empty vessels or products on an assembly line.

So this means that democratic education should teach students to be autonomous individuals who participate in their communities. Since the people have and use the power in a democracy, students should help shape their learning so that it benefits them in the best way possible, and then they should participate in their education. If we look at the traditional teaching of grammar, this is not what we see, however. Generally, students complete meaningless, uninteresting, repetitive exercises that teach them little—if anything—about grammar.

Teachers need to show students the reasons to know the grammar of SAE—because real reasons do exist. Frequently, students have experiences that contradict what they are learning in the classroom. For example, students see that using nonstandard varieties of English causes no problems in communication with their friends and family, so they may not see any use for SAE. Students bring their experiences with them and schools need to help them realize how their experiences and their school education connect. This will lead to better, more engaged learning, which will result in students who are more motivated to learn.

Bell hooks refers to the “read, memorize, and test method” that traditional education uses as “the 'banking system' of education, that approach to learning

that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it" (14). *This* is the traditional grammar teaching approach: teaching SAE grammar with worksheets and drills, isolated from anything actually useful in real language application. However, language is constantly changing and there is not one agreed-upon, clearly defined SAE. Obviously, this makes teaching English complicated, but since those traditional methods of teaching do not seem to match our linguistic knowledge of language, we must change our approach, rather than continuing to expect students to learn through obviously faulty methods. By using this banking system of education, "...teachers ignore how *students* produce meaning..." (Henry Giroux 164), which "...undermines the voices of these students..." (Giroux 164) and the teacher becomes "...just another example of institutional/middle class authority telling them what to think" (Giroux 164). Teachers need to recognize that students bring knowledge with them and making connections to this knowledge is how they produce meaning, so the traditional teaching—really, drilling— of SAE grammar in isolation from other work is ineffective.

AUTHORITY AND FREEDOM

In democratic education, teachers must also avoid becoming the authoritarian authority figure. This does not mean that authority does not have a place in a classroom, however. In *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit explains that when teachers deemphasize their power, they move towards indirect communication. So, in an attempt to *appear* more egalitarian, when teachers deemphasize their power, they become more

indirect and less helpful. This is detrimental for struggling students, who are frequently minority students who do not understand how or why to use SAE. This is why people attempt to deemphasize their power in the first place—to avoid disempowering these students! However, teachers *are* authority figures and exhibiting their authority can be helpful. Still, teachers must remember that they are not the only experts in the classroom and they cannot deny the knowledge of their students, but exhibiting power and authority does not necessarily result in the disempowerment of students, particularly when the teacher is aware of this and uses authority effectively.

Not only is appropriate authority necessary for students to create knowledge and learn how to critically think and evaluate, but it is also necessary in order for students to develop autonomy, which is necessary for students to participate in a democratic society. In *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Paulo Freire discusses the tension between freedom and authority, explaining that freedom cannot exist without authority, although many people do not seem to understand this. I have seen many people, especially students, argue that any authority at all contradicts democratic education because it “limits freedom.” To explain authority’s place in freedom, Freire writes that,

Freedom without limit is as impossible as freedom that is suffocated or contracted. If it were without limit, it would take me outside of the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle. Limitless freedom is a negation of the human condition of unfinishedness. (96)

So, limitless freedom is not possible and the guidance of an authority figure is necessary for the development of knowledge, skills, self, and autonomy in children. Developing the self is essentially developing identity, which *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others.” By developing one’s identity, a person can become autonomous, but in order to be autonomous, students also need authority for guidance. To become autonomous citizens, students need to be able to communicate with others in our society in SAE. To be able to do this, students learn SAE from people with authority. Paulo Freire explains that authority, freedom, and the development of autonomy and of the self are intertwined by saying,

At the heart of the experience of coherently democratic authority is a basic, almost obsessive dream: namely, to persuade or convince freedom of its vocation to autonomy as it travels the road to self-construction, using materials from within and without.... It is with this autonomy, laboriously constructed, that freedom will gradually occupy those spaces previously inhabited by dependency. (87)

In order for students to gain the freedom that they want, they need to become autonomous. In order for this to happen, they need to be guided by an authority figure to use what they know and what they are taught so that they can develop themselves as people. Then they will be free from dependency and will become autonomous. In order for students to become autonomous citizens able to participate in society, they need to have some command of SAE. Teachers

should use their authority to make this obvious to students and to teach them this command of SAE in a useful way, so that students can participate in a society designed by the culture of power without degrading the students' culture.

POWER AND OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

Power, however, is a complicated concept. In *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit lists what she believes to be five aspects of power as the following:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or at least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

The first three are by now basic tenets in the literature of the sociology of education, but the last two have seldom been addressed. (24)

These five aspects of power are important to acknowledge in a democratic classroom, particularly when our goal is to have all students capable of participating in our society. Currently, power is distributed in a way that does not allow some groups of people to participate equally in society, so students need to understand this so they can have power and so this can be changed. In order for

this to happen, we need to take these aspects into consideration in our teaching practices and in our educational policies

However, schools do not seem to understand the role of uneven power distributions in our society and education. Delpit has noticed this, and when discussing her interactions with schools about this issue, Delpit writes,

...I do not advocate that it is the school's job to attempt to change the homes of poor and nonwhite children to match the homes of those in the culture of power. That may indeed be a form of cultural genocide. I have frequently heard schools call poor parents "uncaring" when parents respond to the school's urging, saying, "But that's the school's job." What the school personnel fail to understand is that if the parents were members of the culture of power and lived by its rules and codes, then they would transmit those codes to their children. (30)

Changing "the homes of the poor and nonwhite children to match the homes of those in the culture of power" is not only a form of cultural genocide, but does nothing about the uneven power distributions. I have had a similar experience to what Delpit hears schools say. I have heard far too many people, including my peers in the education program and current teachers complain about the "uncaring" parents of "underachieving," minority students. However, these parents are often unable to provide their children with the rules and codes of the culture of power, as Delpit says, and the teachers who are able to provide the rules and codes to them often have little ambition for teaching these particular students *and* have low expectations for their achievements. In this case, student

success is drastically and negatively affected by *teacher attitude*, not student attitude, which is what these teachers believe and would have others believe.

Schools are a middle class culture, and in order to survive in our society, people need to know that culture. So, why do we blame and punish and fail students who do not have access to that culture *because* they do not have access to that culture? Language and culture are tightly connected, and so, language is access to culture. By providing students access to SAE, the language used in the dominant culture, we can begin to provide them access to the dominant culture. Rather than looking at our students and “see[ing] damaged and dangerous caricatures of the vulnerable and impressionable beings before [us]” (Delpit xiii) because our society nurtures and maintains stereotypes, we should strive to understand who we are and how we are connected and disconnected from one another in order to live in a more democratic and equal society. However, while providing students access to this culture by providing them with content that other students get at home, such as SAE, we *must not* attempt to change or degrade their home culture, because there is value in that as well *and* it is a part of their identities.

Despite the minimal awareness teachers may have of this, teachers continue to attempt to change or degrade students’ home culture, rather than explicitly teach students about perception, dominant society, SAE, and nonstandard varieties of English. Delpit cites a study in a class where 78% of dialectal miscues were corrected, while only 27% of non-dialectal miscues were corrected during oral reading. However, nonstandard varieties of English still

have a grammar—and it is possible to speak a nonstandard variety of English incorrectly. So while these teachers were “correcting” the students’ dialectal “errors,” and were ignoring actual errors, they failed to acknowledge the fact that these students had to understand the sentence in order to translate it into their own dialect. These students not only understood the sentence in SAE and were able to make meaning from it, which is essentially the purpose of reading, but they were also able to translate it into another dialect.

When teachers continually correct dialectal miscues in reading and in speech, students are less likely to become fluent readers than other students because of these constant interruptions. This focus also blocks the students’ understanding that reading is meaning making, so they begin to think that reading is for pronunciation and not to get a message. These constant corrections are also likely to cause students to resist reading and resent the teacher—and possibly future teachers. This will likely negatively impact their reading skills in the future and limit the pleasure they could potentially derive from reading—which are both goals of English education. Students have the right to achieve both of these goals while also developing new linguistic skills. It seems that a more effective medium through which to address deviations from SAE may be writing, because unlike speech and reading, writing is a process that allows for editing and for changes.

Students also have the right to develop the linguistic skills they bring into the classroom from their home. Each cultural group should have the right to maintain their own language style, so rather than seeing diversity as a problem,

we should see that diversity of thought, language, and worldview can create an exciting classroom setting and prepare students to live in our diverse nation. So, rather than assuming we know how to teach a diverse group of cultures, Delpit suggests we ask the people *in* the cultures how best to teach them. For example, she lists three characteristics that she says black students attribute to a good teacher: they should have ability to run the class, should push their students, and expect their students to learn. In my experience, when teachers, usually white, interact with black students, they deemphasize their power and have low expectations for these students. Therefore, black students may believe they have an inept teacher—and really, they do, because their teachers are not providing them with an adequate education.

CRITICAL LITERACY

In order to gain the critical thinking and analysis skills necessary to become capable citizens, critical literacy is necessary. This literacy does not mean merely being able to read and write, which discriminates against anyone who is not a member of the dominant culture because they do not have access to that culture. Instead, critical literacy means finding multiple understandings of one's own experience, the experiences of other people, and how one constructs the idea of self. Critical literacy means being able to read society, look at relationships, see how ideas are created, and examine the inequalities that exist (Giroux). In order to do this, students need to understand societal perceptions of SAE and of other dialects, as well as understand SAE itself. It is much easier to examine discriminations in society and make changes in that society when one is

able to understand these. We cannot act as if this power does not exist. To do so ensures that nothing changes. To imply that it does not matter how a person talks or writes in society is to ensure their ultimate failure (Delpit).

Language is important in critical literacy. Language is the communication of ideas and feelings, but it is also communication of authority, power, and oppression. The texts and language used in schools often are written from the perspective of the dominant culture, so students with a different background often do not exist in this dominant discourse—in SAE, in the language of those in the dominant culture. If they do exist, they are often in the position of an opponent who needs to be overcome. If they exist in a struggle to better our society (e.g. the struggle for civil rights), the dominant society is often portrayed in a way that shows the dominant society in the most positive way possible (e.g. history from the point of view of those supporting the struggle, rather than those opposing it). When we see literacy as passively reading texts written in SAE without examining it critically and ignoring the fact that literacy is more than reading *written* texts, literacy becomes “a process is as disempowering as it is oppressive” (Giroux 151).

Despite the arbitrary nature of language, it *is* politically charged. These “others” are not only missing from the language used in the classroom, which makes it difficult for these students to connect with their education, but are also disempowered and oppressed by their absence. While they may be aware of this, frequently students and teachers who are members of the dominant culture are generally *unaware* of this. Changing the language used in the classroom,

teaching students about language perceptions, teaching SAE, and teaching critical literacy will improve the education and lives of both minority citizens and those who are members of the dominant culture, hopefully leading to a more democratic educational experience for all involved.

This kind of discrimination exists in teaching as well as in standardized evaluations of student thinking, such as those frequently required to get into universities or to get scholarships to pay for those schools. When evaluations are based on a standard that is based on the dominant culture, students who are not a part of this culture are unfairly and undemocratically evaluated. We either need to change these evaluations or teach students how to access the dominant culture—or better yet, both. To truly fix this problem, however, we must go from the top down, not the bottom up, but meanwhile, “we must take the responsibility to *teach*; to provide for students who do not already possess them, the additional codes of power [emphasis in the original]” (Delpit 40). By codes of power, Delpit means the ways that members of the dominant culture have access to that culture, for example, through language—through SAE.

A SOCIAL PROBLEM

In William Labov's article “When Ordinary Children Fail to Read,” he explains that in schools, there is often a focus on children who have a specific deficit (for example, dyslexia). However, he argues that there is a bigger problem that is not focused on—that minority children struggle to read and at the time it was written (2003), there was no research about how to fix this. Interestingly, their struggle parallels the literacy problems in countries where

children's home language does not match their first language of reading instruction, which is also associated with linguistic opposition between the dominant language group's standard language and the nonstandard varieties or opposition between two distinct languages (129). Both of these situations are found here in the United States and it seems that this is also the case with our minority children.

Labov says that some of these failures to achieve literacy come from "language difference obstructions." However, this is a social problem, not a psychological deficit. In the past, researchers have tried to solve this literacy problem by examining what is wrong with the children, rather than what can be done to change the education system to fix the social problem (129). A number of social problems have been identified through research as being responsible for the low educational achievement of inner-city schools. However, while we can try to fix these in the future through whole-school educational reform, we can also work towards fixing the literacy failures by "apply[ing] our knowledge of the reading process to actual teaching of reading in the inner-city schools" (129).

The suggested solution is that we need to understand three concerns: the problem, the structure of student social linguistic knowledge, and the process of reading from a nonreader's point of view—which we are far from being able to do. This is made even more difficult because of the difference between the children's points of view and adult understanding of reading and phonetics (130). Phonetic analysis of abstract characters is difficult, but is even more difficult when attempted by someone who is not a native speaker and is a child.

Currently, reading is taught to these students using remedial methods, but it would ideally be taught using knowledge of their language system—their dialectal English—to introduce letter-sound correspondences, allowing them to make connections (130). Additionally, knowledge of children’s early experiences is important because children often transfer rules from their native language to their new language. Once a student’s problems are defined based on these linguistic differences rather than on an assumption that something is wrong with the student, Labov finds that learning proceeds rapidly. Labov implies that teaching students to decode—to decipher and understand SAE—will improve their learning.

GRAMMAR RANTS

In “Analyzing Grammar Rants,” Lindblom and Dunn offer another solution for teaching grammar: using “grammar rants.” Grammar rants are the published, passionate “complaints about the teaching of grammar, spelling, writing, and speaking” (71). They suggest this solution for three reasons:

1. They are more fun and interesting to explore than lists of rules.
2. A grammar rant from a prominent cultural figure highlights the fact that powerful people make value judgments about other people’s intelligence based on language use.
3. Grammar rants tend to focus on “the direct impact of language use on communication of meaning and the social connotations that are embedded in language choices” (75).

By analyzing grammar rants, students better understand language and its relationship to culture, while using material that they actually find interesting and meaningful. This helps students to become savvy language users.

CODESWITCHING IN THE CLASSROOM

English teachers associate SAE with “grammar” and are either unaware of or ignore the fact that *all* language varieties have grammar. In “Codeswitching: Tools of Language and Culture Transform the Dialectally Diverse Classroom,” authors Wheeler and Swords point to an error in this approach by informing us that “the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; rather, he or she is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community” (471). Teaching English as this “correction” program is damaging, false, and the correction of student language “presupposes that only one language form is ‘correct’ in structure and that this form is ‘good’ in all contexts” (473).

This traditional approach of correction removes many possibilities for connections that students can make between school and their home life using different language varieties. They also insinuate that there is something wrong with the students’ cultures, which helps create a separation between the students’ values of their culture and the values of the school. The problem, then, is that they are using a language variety that is not appropriate for the time, place, audience, or communicative purpose. In order to teach students to use the appropriate language variety for the situation, it is necessary to help students codeswitch, which is similar to Labov’s idea of decoding. Codeswitching teaches

children to switch back and forth between SAE and vernacular English when appropriate—to be able to codeswitch means to be able “to choose the pattern of language appropriate to the context” (Wheeler and Swords 475).

Rather than attempting to correct and remove student use of nonstandard language, we can take a different approach to language once we recognize that language variations also follow a grammar. Through this different approach, which teaches students to codeswitch, “we may *add* language varieties to the child’s linguistic toolbox, bringing a pluralistic vantage to language in the classroom [emphasis in the original],” which allows students to keep the language of their culture, while adding SAE as a linguistic tool necessary for success in our society.

Wheeler and Swords (473) list three key notions from applied linguistics that is the basis they believe should be used for working with language in the classroom:

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

Once we understand these notions, it is much easier to accept that there is nothing *inherently good* in SAE nor is there anything *inherently bad* about nonstandard varieties of English. Once the teacher and the students have accepted this, the English language can be taught by contrasting the grammatical patterns of standard and nonstandard varieties of English—and students can be taught to codeswitch.

Students generally are unaware of their dialect and the grammatical features of nonstandard varieties of English that interfere with their use of SAE. When language varieties were contrasted in the classroom by students in the article, they were able to discover the detailed differences between them, and were then capable of preventing nonstandard intrusions into their use of SAE (Wheeler and Swords). This means that students were able to switch between a nonstandard and SAE at the appropriate times and places, as well as recognize the concept that each language has an appropriate setting—and other students should be able to do the same.

When Swords moved from “correction teaching” to teaching by contrasting language varieties in her third grade classroom, she discovered that the first notion she needed to teach her students was that language varies by the formality of the situation. To introduce this notion, she had her class discuss formal and informal clothing and then she shifted that discussion to language. Swords then had her students contrast standard and nonstandard language in order to discover the patterns in each language variety. Following that, they read works that contained multiple language varieties. Students then applied this knowledge of language varieties into their own writing. As a class, they created a dialogue for a story using SAE and a nonstandard variety of English. Then students created stories of their own where they had to make decisions about the language variety each of their characters would use.

She points out to her readers that the contrasts between formal/informal, written/spoken, and home/school are oversimplifications of the way that language

is patterned. However, she wanted to stress the point that *different language patterns are appropriate in different contexts*. Before her students learned to codeswitch, they had to guess on which language form was expected, whereas after learning to codeswitch, her students understood that one language variety is not suitable for all communication tasks. This analysis that students have to do when contrasting language varieties means that they are critically thinking, which is one of the goals of democratic education. This also helps bring truth to the destructive myths about language variation that frequently result in dialectal prejudices.

When Swords' students edit their papers, they look for their successes in matching their language to SAE. When they find language that does not match, they recognize it and change it. Learning to codeswitch has also helped her students to be able to articulate reasons for language choice in their writing *on their own*. In fact, her students learned the standard better when nonstandard dialects are taken into consideration in teaching methods. One benefit of the skills students learn from contrasting language varieties is that students can better recognize that test questions ask for answers in SAE. Proof of this improvement can be seen in Swords' students. After teaching through contrast for only one year, her black students and white students performed equally well on the benchmarks at the end of the year—a huge improvement from the previous year, when black students performed significantly worse on those tests than white students.

CULTURE AND DISCRIMINATION

Educational theorist R.T. Fancher writes that “schools and teachers have a responsibility to students to teach them the best language that we currently can—the language of the most sophisticated, careful thinkers of our culture” (57), and later says that some will argue “...that we cannot distinguish 'dialects' as better or worse. Persons who believe this must have limited knowledge...or a general obtuseness” (58). However, Fancher eventually adds that while correct usage of standard English should be used “...for the purposes of sophisticated, accurate thinking and communication...” (67), linguistic dialects have some merit in communicating with people in certain occasions, and that this is acceptable. Really, this is not merely acceptable, but is sometimes necessary. Students do need to be able to communicate in SAE because our current society makes judgments about people based on their linguistic abilities.

Fancher is wrong in arguing that dialects can be “better or worse” than a standard language, however. There is no linguistic proof that any form of language is better than another. Linguists M. Adams and A. Curzan write

But we can also make very unfair judgments about people based on their speech, and it is important to be aware of those leaps from linguistic features to stereotypes or unjustified beliefs associated with those features. (7)

Viewing language the way that Fancher does helps perpetuate discrimination in education. It is important that in democratic education, students learn to see the discrimination and what it means for individuals and our society. Hopefully by

critically analyzing language and language perceptions of SAE and nonstandard English, students will see how language can be disempowering and oppressive, will recognize "...that some practices (voices/stories) define themselves through the suppression of other voices [and] support forms of human suffering..." (Giroux 161), and will use their skills to change the way our society is and is governed.

To further complicate this, again, language is cultural and therefore, people associate different stereotypes with various dialects. Some of these stereotypes are seen as positive and some are seen as negative in our culture. Subcultures within our society also make separate associations with dialects, which may be similar to or drastically different from the associations that the majority culture holds. Wheeler and Swords write "...the issue of who learns what language is deeply political, rooted in the social and cultural structure of society" (477). When dialects are associated with a positive or negative stereotype, people make judgments about the dialect and apply those associations to the group of people who speaks that dialect. While people and cultures place values on language varieties, these varieties are intrinsically neutral.

This also means that SAE is not naturally better or worse than another dialect of English. The associations that groups hold with SAE cause them to see SAE as positive or negative. Teachers see SAE as positive and tend to integrate misinformation about language varieties into their classroom. Since that misinformation tends to be related to stereotypes, teachers are more likely to

consider students who speak nonstandard varieties of English as less intelligent and able than those who speak standard varieties (Wheeler and Swords; Labov "Reading Failure").

In democratic classrooms, it is important for language to be used in a way that accepts and acknowledges everyone. The way language is used affects the way that people think. Educational theorist Leon Botstein writes that "...thoughts emerge from language and not before it" (44). Students all have their own stories to tell, and need to share them so that the stories are known without suppressing others so that people do not begin to think in oppressive ways. Sharing their stories, ideas, and knowledge is important "...to show the students that their thinking and writing can be of consequence and have meaning for others" (Botstein 42). When students realize this, they should also realize that they can get meaning from the stories, ideas, and knowledge of other students. It is important for these students to speak as well as listen, and both speak and listen without prejudice. If people are prejudiced against any particular groups of people, they cannot listen to them or speak with them. They can only speak to or at them in an authoritarian manner, without respect (Freire). So, by teaching students about perception, prejudice, and language, we can encourage connections between what they already know and what they are learning and encourage connections among students, as well as reducing prejudice.

Schools that exist in a democratic society should develop students as critical thinkers capable of living and participating in a democratic society, who are capable of communicating with and understanding SAE. The most effective

way of doing this is through democratic schooling, which allows students to more actively participate in their education, collaborate with their peers, and connect their lives outside of the classroom to schooling. The purpose and value of education must be made more visible to the students. Students need to be actively involved in their education and need to examine their world critically. I do not believe this democratic education is possible if our classrooms approach the teaching of SAE as “bettering” their language skills while simultaneously devaluing student dialects and cultures, either implicitly or explicitly. In this type of classroom, nonstandard varieties of English are deemed “bad,” and are not explained or discussed. If students feel that their language, which is part of their culture and identity, is not valued by their teachers, then what reason do they have to value the SAE being taught—or really, anything those educators teach?

CONCLUSION

It seems that in order to most effectively teach students and reach our goals, there are a number of possibilities. Rather than inaccurately telling students that their dialectal English is incorrect and the standard is correct, we should be explaining the reasons *why* the standard is of value for them. Then, we need to teach them when it is appropriate to use the standard over their dialects and vice versa, and how to switch among them. The tools that will allow students to do this, to understand SAE, nonstandard varieties of English, and the perception of both, are language awareness and codeswitching. We must be sure *avoid* teaching SAE in isolation—students need to make some sort of meaningful and useful connection with it. We must also understand that our

struggle with SAE and nonstandard varieties of English is a cultural problem and *not* a deficit in the children—and so we must change the way we teach and think, rather than punish the children. We need to teach against prejudice while still teaching students that people make assumptions about the language a person uses, so students should purposely choose the language most appropriate for a situation, while also understanding that many people are unaware of these prejudices, at least explicitly. Students should also understand that because language is so closely tied to culture, and therefore identity, it is an extremely personal and sensitive issue. While these solutions may not completely develop students into people who are able to effectively use SAE, they will help guide us there. These are things that teachers can implement into their classroom while continuing to work towards better national educational policies, in order to create a more equal, democratic education for all students and that allows them to use SAE when necessary, or to access the dominant culture, while still keeping their dialectal language and their cultural identity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, M. & Curzan, A. (2009). *How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education Inc.
- Bennett, W. J. Foreword. *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools*. Eds. Fancher, R.T., Finn Jr., C.E., & Ravitch, D New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984. vii-xi. Print.
- Bestor, Arthur. *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985. Print.
- Bishop, Kaia. "What A Democratic Education Takes." Unpublished essay. 2010.
- Botstein, Leon. Language, Reasoning, and the Humanities. In Fancher, R.T., Finn Jr., C.E., & Ravitch, D. (Eds.), *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools* (pp. 30-48). New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984. Print.
- "CEE Position Statement." *National Council of Teachers of Education*. National Council of Teachers of Education, n.d. Web. 22 March 2012.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children : Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York, NY: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995. Print.
- Dewey, John. "Education as a Necessity of Life." *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. *ILT Digital Classics*. 1994. ILT Digital Classics. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.
- Dewey, John. "My Pedagogic Creed." *School Journal*, 54. (1987): 77-80. Print.

- Eds. Gadsden, Vivian L, and Daniel A. Wagner. *Literacy Among African-American Youth: Issues in Learning, Teaching, and Schooling*. Cresskill, N.J: Hampton Press, 1995. 39-68. Print.
- Fancher, R. T. English Teaching and Humane Culture. In Fancher, R.T., Finn Jr., C.E., & Ravitch, D. (Eds.), *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools*. New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984. 49-49. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998. Print.
- "Frequently Asked Questions." *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d. Web. 22 March 2012.
- Giroux, Henry. *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Print.
- Gordon, Matthew J. "Interview with William Labov." *Journal of English Linguistics*. 34 (2006): 332-351. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.
- "Grammar, n.". OED Online. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 10 March 2012.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- "Identity, n.". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 18 April 2012.

Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. New York, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1970.

Print.

Labov, William. "Can Reading Failure Be Reversed? A Linguistic Approach to the Question." *Literacy Among African-American Youth*. Eds. Gadsden, V. and Wagner, D. Cresskill, NJ, 1995. 1-23. Web.

Labov, William. "When Ordinary Children Fail to Read." *Reading Research Quarterly* 38.1 (Jan. – Mar. 2003): 128-131. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.

"Language, n. (and int.)". *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 11 March 2012.

Lindblom, Kenneth and Dunn, Patricia A. "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction." *English Journal* 95.5: 71-77. *JSTOR*. Web 6. Sept. 2011.

"Mission Statement." *National Council of Teachers of Education*. National Council of Teachers of Education, n.d. Web. 22 March 2012.

"NCTE Core Values." *National Council of Teachers of Education*. National Council of Teachers of Education, n.d. Web. 22 March 2012.

Perry, Theresa, and Lisa Delpit, eds. *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998. Print.

Ravitch, Diane. *Celebrating America. Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in American's Schools*. Ed. Westheimer, Joel. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004. 91-94. Print.

Rickford, John R. "The Oakland Ebonics Decision: Commendable Attack on the Problem." Original text of the Op Ed article printed in the *San Jose Mercury News*, 26 Dec. 1996. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.

"So What Is Democratic Education Anyway?" *The Institute for Democratic Education in America*. The Institute for Democratic Education in America, n.d. Web. 22 March 2012.

"Standard, n. and adj.". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 18 April 2012.

Wheeler, Rebecca, and Rachel Swords. "Codeswitching: Tools of Language and Culture Transform the Dialectally Diverse Classroom." *Language Arts* 81.6 (July 2004): 470-480. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.

Zinn, Howard. Foreword. *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in American's Schools*. Ed. Westheimer, Joel. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004. xi-xvi. Print.