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Teaching Language Responsibly: The Problem of "Standard English"

For English and Language Arts teachers, these words are all too familiar:

"Oh, you teach English? I *hated* diagramming sentences."

"My high school English classes were torture. No offense."

"You must be a Grammar Nazi--I'll have to watch what I say around you."

The reactions above illustrate a common attitude in our society: that English teachers exist to enforce rigid ideas about what language is, to teach Grammar and Pronunciation wielding red pens and repetitive exercises, forcing unwilling students and perhaps even innocent passersby who dare to utter a "who" in place of "whom" to bow to almighty Standard English. And certainly, such language fundamentalists do exist, insisting that Standard English is "real English" or "good English" and "the language of any nonstandard speaker, no matter how imaginative, pungent, or apt, [is] simply, 'bad English'" (Eskey 769). John W. White noted in his work with pre-service teachers that many of them "saw 'English' as a rigidly defined set of unchanging norms and their role as English teachers to be language police," which illustrates that ideas about prescriptive language are deep in our cultural paradigm (44). Current national educational standards also reinforce the idea of a superior English dialect. In the Common Core

State Standards for Language Arts in grades 9-10, students are expected to "[d]emonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking" and "[d]emonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing" (Common Core). While another standard does specify that students "[a]pply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts," the emphasis of the standards is definitely placed on student mastery of a specific English dialect which has been identified as the Standard. However, despite these long-held ideas about proper language usage, the fact is that enforcing a Standard English dialect is fraught with potential issues. The nature of a Standard dialect is tenuous at best and discriminatory at its worst, and teachers must approach it with students in a responsible manner. When taught, Standard English should be presented to students with transparency and context in order to avoid enforcing prejudiced, inaccurate ideas about the way language functions. As part of language instruction, teachers should also allow students to develop and celebrate their own speech identities. While it is unfair that all dialects are not given equal weight in our society, putting those who use non-standard dialects at a disadvantage, teachers are doing students a disservice if they do not teach them Standard English in order to allow them access to areas of society that demand its usage.

There are a number of problems with the notion of a Standard English that is superior to other dialects, the first and most important being that Standard English is nearly impossible to define. By applying Prototype theory to language, it becomes evident that the Standard can be approximated, but not defined absolutely, since Prototype theory asserts that

> each conceptual category has defining features, which are obligatory, and characteristic features, which are typical… [i]t is not actually possible to define standard English, any more than it is possible to define any other dialect. All we can do is to give a few examples of usages that are clearly either standard English or not standard English. (Trudgill ctd. in Speicher 156)

Since its definition is so tenuous, it is difficult to argue that Standard English is somehow superior and preferable to other dialects. Speicher and Bielanski note that it is in fact more accurate to refer to the "preferred" dialect as "Standard Ideology" rather than "Standard English," since the former aptly characterizes it as an idea that people have constructed about what is proper and correct. Culturally and socially, Standard Ideology is almost always considered preferable to non-standard dialects. This unfounded assumption can be harmful for several reasons--it "justifies discriminatory practices in the schools, the workplace, and society," and also "privileges certain usages and stigmatizes others, adversely affect[ing]the lives of those who use stigmatized forms" (156). It also "justifies the use of language testing and assessment that regularly labels features of a child's home dialect as pathological, meriting remediation… [and] serves to track students into particular curricula, classes, or schools" (158). Cultural ideas about what is "right" language, though not based on any measurable criteria, create barriers for those who do not use the Standard dialect proficiently.

The one medium in which it is possible to concretely identify a Standard English is in writing, but many continue to insist that Standard Written English (SWE) and spoken Standard English are inseparable. One of the major differences between speech and writing is that "speech is context-tied and social… [w]riting, however, is context-free and solitary" (Speicher 150).

Spoken language is also acquired naturally, while written language must be learned, and "the grammar of writing differs from that of speech (Dykema, 1958), although most grammarians treat them as identical" (150). These differences emphasize that teachers must be careful to help students understand that Standard English can exist in writing, but not necessarily in speech--in fact, Speicher and Beilanski assert that "no educated person should confound speech and writing, trying to impose the rules of one on the other form" (151).

One of the most troubling problems with Standard English is that in our society, it tends to function as a gate which denies access to power to those who do not use it fluently. Teachers may feel that they are in the uncomfortable position of reinforcing this idea when they teach students to communicate in the Standard dialect. However, sociolinguists have suggested solutions to this problem. One is the "bidialectalist (or biloquialist) position:" that "nonstandard" speakers should learn the Standard dialect while still maintaining their original speech identity (Eskey 771). "The nonstandard speaker, so the argument runs, must learn it if he wants to get ahead in our society; he should not, however, be expected to give up the dialect of his family and friends" (771). Many educators also subscribe to this two-sided approach, arguing that teachers have an obligation to teach students the "codes of power" that will enable them to have future success. Linda Christensen suggests that

> it would be misleading to suggest that people in our society will value my thoughts or my students' thoughts as readily in our home languages as in the "cash language" as Jesse Jackson calls it. Students need to know where to find help, and they need to understand what changes might be necessary, but they need to learn in a context that doesn't say, "The way you said this is wrong." (37)

John W. White also argues the importance of this approach, noting that allowing students to retain their own speech identities while learning the Standard dialect "creates a culturally responsive and inclusive foundation from which to teach students code-switching to Standard English" (White). However, other linguists and educators disagree with the bidialectalist position, arguing that it acknowledges and supports institutionalized prejudice against certain dialects: that "the whole idea is based on what is essentially a racist premise-that minorities must learn to do things our way in order to succeed in American society" (Eskey 771). In response to this position, Eskey notes that Standard English is important for reasons other than simply upward mobility--it also provides a common version of our language that enables us to communicate more widely, making the language universally intelligible despite a variety of dialects.

So, in light of all the potential problems that Standard English presents, how can teachers responsibly teach it to students? One strategy is to be fully transparent with students about what language is and how it functions. Teachers can help students examine the social structures that reinforce a "Standard Language" and question why and how they exist. Christensen articulates the importance of this analysis:

> Asking my students to memorize the rules without asking who makes the rules, who enforces the rules, who benefits from the rules, who loses from the rules, who uses the rules to keep some in and keep others out legitimates a social system that devalues my students' knowledge and language… [f]urther, the study of Standard English without critique encourages students to believe that if they fail,

> it is because they are not smart enough or didn't work hard enough. They learn to blame themselves. (40)

Students who are unaware of the social structures that support a Standard dialect may mistakenly assume that their own dialects make them somehow inferior. Speicher & Bielanski note that prescriptivists have been so successful in disseminating the idea of a Standard that "[e]ven those who use stigmatized forms [often] believe that other forms are 'better'" (154). They advocate for teaching students "Standard Ideology" rather than "Standard English," emphasizing that "notions of correctness held by the well educated" are what really create the standards that students are held to (156). Teachers can also emphasize to students that written English is a dialect in itself, separate and different from spoken dialects, so that students do not ascribe difficulties with written language to a shortcoming in their spoken language ability.

Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to examine their own ideas and prejudices about language. John W. White describes several activities for pre-service teachers in his Methods of Teaching classes which could easily be adapted for middle and high school students. In one activity, students are given two reading passages with questions. One passage is *Beowulf* (written in Old English) and one is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (written in Middle English). As students struggle with the readings and the questions, it becomes apparent that English is a language in flux, and ideas about what is "correct" in a language can change dramatically through generations. White also helps students recognize the power of dialect to convey meaning and emotion by providing them with "non-Standard" language that they must translate into Standard English. He gives students the lyrics to Tupac Shakur's "Me Against the World," and after students have "translated" the lyrics to a Standard dialect, they discover that

> the original, non-Standard English passage inevitably holds far more emotional and rhetorical power regardless of audience… [v]ia different translations of the same text, my students experienced firsthand how meaning can be lost when we insist on a rigid form of English for making meaning. (47)

White also challenges the notion that Standard English is somehow more "logical" than other language varieties. He provides students with a passage from Martin Heidegger's work *Poetry, Language, Thought* that exemplifies the Standard English dialect. It is not written at an especially high level: "it rates a 10.6 grade level on the Flesch Kincaid readability measurement" (48). However, when students attempt to find meaning in the passage, they often become frustrated and are unable to do so. This activity helps students understand that "Standard English is relative; one's ability to understand a text—even a text with simple vocabulary and construction—is dependent on one's linguistic standards" (48). Classroom activities such as these allow teachers to help students understand the dynamic nature of language and the necessity of skepticism toward those who argue for a rigid Standard.

In teaching students Standard English, teachers cannot neglect to also give students opportunities to develop and celebrate their own speech identities. One way to do this is to assign students a "language autobiography" in which they must analyze and explain aspects of their own dialect. Students can explore the influences that contribute to their speech identities, examining the dialects of their families and communities and finding out what makes them unique. They can provide examples of their own dialects, explaining the aspects of their language that they find interesting, and perhaps even providing examples of written or spoken language that they personally identify with. Giving students the opportunity to share these

autobiographies with each other makes this activity even more powerful: while on one hand, they may more clearly see the aspects of language which they share (such as teenage slang), it also provides a positive context for them to express individuality and develop a voice. Teachers can also promote use of dialect in student writing. Linda Christensen describes bringing in an older student who, “like Zora Neale Hurston, blends her home language with Standard English in most pieces,” to model writing for her first-year writing classes (38). The student demonstrates the value in using both dialect and Standard English:

> “I'm tired of washing dishes. Seems like every time our family gets together, they just got to eat and bring their millions of kids over to our house. And then we got to wash the dishes."
>
> I listened sympathetically as my little sister mumbled these words.
>
> “And how come we cain't have ribs like grownups? After all, ain't we grown?"
>
> "Lord," I prayed, "seal her lips while the blood is still running warm in her veins.” (38)

Providing students with models of writing that incorporate use of dialect gives them permission to consider their own ways of speaking as equivalent to the Standard.

The described examples of classroom activities just begin to help teachers scratch the surface of a deeply complicated issue. Language teachers are in a tough position, since they must be honest with themselves and students about the nature of Standard English while still making student success a priority. This can feel hypocritical, since some teachers may feel that they are only reinforcing the structures that ostracize those who do not use the Standard language proficiently. However, study of Standard English with transparency and context allows students

to not only become better at communicating in “codes of power,” but also allows them to situate themselves in the world of language and develop an appreciation for their own speech identities. By giving them knowledge about what language really is and how it works, we free them from the cycle of shame and inadequacy that has plagued so many “non-standard” speakers in the past. Students can become effective communicators who also have the ability to advocate for themselves and change our cultural paradigm regarding dialect and “correct” speech.

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