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Moving Students toward Acceptance of "Other" Englishes

Recounting a successful means of introducing other Englishes, the author encourages understanding and acceptance of devalued Englishes among mainstream-English-speaking students.

Not Wrong, Just Different

When I started an English MA program three years ago, it was with a different concept of what is right and wrong in standard English than I currently hold. Having spent my entire life in white, mostly mainstream-English-speaking schools and communities, I saw other varieties of English as incorrect, error-filled versions of my own standard. It turns out, though, that the error was mine. An introductory linguistics course made me question and rethink my view of other Englishes. Subsequent courses reinforced my new understanding that other dialects of English—ones I had been contributing to the marginalization of—are not wrong; they are just different from mine. But because I currently teach in a large, mostly white, high-achieving, suburban high school full of mainstream English speakers, I was unsure what I could do to help students who speak marginalized Englishes. I looked to Vershawn Ashanti Young's article, "Should Writers Use They Own English?" and his words gnawed at me: "we all should know everybody's dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication" (111). His call for awareness—not just on the part of speakers of other Englishes but also for mainstream English speakers—made me realize that progress likely cannot happen without my students.

The issue of multilingualism is not solely one of schools with diverse populations. It is an issue for all schools. Without awareness of the validity of devalued Englishes on the part of mainstream speakers, it is less likely that the margins will ever be widened enough to include, much less center, the marginalized. And that is something I can address in my middle-class mainstream classroom.

Theory behind the Practice

Native English speakers are outnumbered globally by nonnative speakers and have been for decades. In 1991, Braj B. Kachru noted that nonnative speakers—those for whom English is either a lingua franca or the language of commerce or formal education—numbered more than a billion strong, while speakers for whom English is their mother tongue stood at just roughly 350 million (179). This means at the least that native speakers who purport to speak and write in standard English are entering an economy wherein they are outnumbered by those whose spoken and written English lie outside the mainstream. If for no other reason, native English speakers need to be exposed to and have an accepting attitude toward Englishes other than the mainstream because two out of three speakers of English are nonnative speakers, and native speakers will need to accept other Englishes to function in a global economy.

But further than that, mainstream English speakers also need to have an accepting attitude toward other native Englishes, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Chicano English, Appalachian English, and so on, to better understand and appreciate other speakers and to reduce prejudice based on language use: *linguicism*. Judgment based on language use remains a

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generally accepted prejudice in the United States: "Many of us feel free to make judgments about others because of the ways that they use language . . . . We act as though dialects and accents are windows to people's souls, and sometimes we dare to ignore or dismiss entire groups of people because of what we assume their linguistic habits reveal about them" (Zuidema 341). This continuing bastion of discrimination is not immovable, however. Peter Elbow notes that "we're already immersed in the first stage of divergence—where mainstream spoken language is starting to be acceptable for generally literate serious writing" (376), and that wider acceptance of less formal standard English will eventually lead to greater acceptance of marginalized Englishes. It is better for our mainstream-English-speaking students to be ahead of this curve—or even lead it—toward acceptance than to wallow behind in stubborn ignorance of the validity of other Englishes. After all, it is the mainstream speakers' views of other Englishes that continue to marginalize them: "Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views

about other people usin they own language . . . that make it so" (Young 110).

Stigmatized Englishes are such largely because of widespread misunderstanding. For the purposes of this article, I will focus primarily on misunderstandings of AAVE, but similar misunderstandings can be attributed to the stigmas surrounding other varieties of English that sound "wrong" to the mainstream speaker. One of the greatest misunderstandings about non-mainstream Englishes is that they are bastardizations of "good" or "proper" English. But in fact, each dialect— including the mainstream—is just that: a dialect. Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams explain, "A dialect is *not* an inferior or degraded form of a language, and logically could not be so since a language is a collection of dialects" (445). Besides the linguistic reality of dialects, the roots of the English language should also be considered in evaluating dialect validity: "English is probably the most impure bastardized language there's ever been. It's slept with every language it ever encountered, even casually. The strength of

English comes from how many babies it's had with how many partners" (Elbow 365). Those who purport the mainstream to be superior not only fail to understand the definition of a dialect but they also overlook—perhaps intentionally—the fact that one of the great achievements of English is how well it has accepted, adopted, and adapted linguistic features of other languages. With this understanding, it is easier to accept the validity of varieties of English that sound less like one's own. But first, one needs to understand that each variety of English is rule governed and not just a willy-nilly assemblage of misuses.

Many mainstream American English speakers, for example, misinterpret the habitual *be* of AAVE as a failure to correctly conjugate the *be* verb. When presented with the feature in terms of aspect, many of these same mainstream speakers will realize that the feature follows a predictable rule: use of *be* in sentences like *He be talkin* expresses an ongoing state or activity rather than a lack of understanding of number and person (Redd and Webb 33). By establishing that non-mainstream Englishes are, in fact, governed by rules and are not simply incorrect versions of a standard, the focus of written and spoken communication may shift from judgment to a "disposition of openness and inquiry that people take toward language and language differences" (Horner et al. 311). Rather than seeking the rightness or wrongness of certain features of any particular dialect, readers and listeners are free instead to seek out meaning.

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By providing students in primarily mainstream-English-speaking schools exposure to and understanding of the differences among several varieties of English, teachers can help head off linguicism and prejudice before they take a stronger hold as students get older. Rosina Lippi-Green notes that "people feel strongly about their language, and are willing to express their opinion" (56), and this is true of those who are speakers of and believe strongly in a standard English that represents education and prestige. Students with

a greater understanding of the linguistics behind devalued Englishes are more likely to become partners in eliminating the stigmas attached to non-mainstream varieties than those who are left to believe that their dialect is somehow more correct or valuable than others.

Still, how does a white woman speaking mainstream English in a school with a jam-packed and relatively rigid curriculum feature meaningful lessons about multilingualism?

Calpurnia Emerges

One of my four core curriculum texts is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. As I prepared to teach this third-quarter text, I thought about how I might connect the racism in Lee's canonical novel to the linguicism associated with devalued varieties of English in the United States today. It occurred to me that Atticus Finch's housekeeper Calpurnia is the perfect connection between the text and language-based prejudice. In her conversation with the children about her code-switching from Chapter 12 (see Figure 1), she explains why she changes the way she speaks, and Scout experiences an epiphany in realizing that Calpurnia has "command of two languages" (Lee 167). Here was the opportunity to introduce my students to the validity of other Englishes: I could use the conversation between Cal and the Finch children as a springboard to discuss language use and prejudice through Young's "Should Writers Use They Own Language?" and the Stanley Fish blog post to which Young was responding. Because the class was beginning a unit about argumentative writing, the connection between language use and the use of

FIGURE 1. Excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"That's why you don't talk like the rest of 'em," said Jem.
"The rest of who?"
"Rest of the colored folks. Cal, but you talked like they did in church…"
That Calpurnia led a modest double life never dawned on me. The idea that she had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one, to say nothing of her having command of two languages.
"Cal," I asked, "why do you talk niggertalk to the—to your folks when you know it's not right?"
"Well, in the first place I'm black—"

claims and evidence in the Fish and Young pieces allowed me to both introduce multilingualism and argument instruction through the same lesson. Calpurnia's conversation with Scout and Jem was the topical catalyst for the debate between Fish and Young.

Setting Up Understanding

Before getting to Young's piece, I wanted the students to think about Calpurnia's language use and her explanation to the kids. I also wanted them to have a basic understanding of how the term *code-switching*[1] is generally used in education. Both of these background items are essential for the understanding I hoped the students would gain from the activity as a whole. My English 9 students keep blogs wherein they respond to various questions about their reading assignments, so the blog offered an opportunity for the students to do some exploratory thinking about Calpurnia's code-switching.

With the reading assignment that included Chapter 12, I assigned the following blog prompt:

> Code-switching is widely understood as changing the way one speaks or writes based on audience or situational factors. This definition of code-switching includes the type of change in speaking that Calpurnia exhibits and explains in Chapter Twelve. For your blog entry, consider Calpurnia's reasoning and explanation in one paragraph: how and why does she change the way she speaks? Then in a second paragraph, explain whether or not you think people code-switch in this way today. Offer examples where possible.

I wanted to get the students thinking about not only Calpurnia's language use but also their own language use and the use of language they hear on a regular basis. No one speaks or writes in Standard American English all the time; highlighting students' language differences or those they are familiar with would become a bridge to understanding and appreciating devalued Englishes.

A quick review of the students' blogs revealed that virtually every student recognized the need for changing the way they speak based on their audience or situation. Most students focused on the differences between the way they communicate with friends versus parents or teachers, but some even considered online versus in-person communications and how they speak with the same people in different situations (a friend in the hallway versus that same friend at football practice, for example). Several focused on their use of slang or taboo words (swearing) with their peers as opposed to with their families or instructors. A few focused on differences in speech among speakers of marginalized varieties of English and how audience would dictate how they spoke. In all, though, the students had the right idea (see Figure 2 for excerpts of student responses).

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When the students arrived in class, we had a discussion about code-switching. We discussed—briefly—the difference in definition between linguists and educators. Then we discussed Vershawn Young's description of code-meshing: use of more than one language or variety within a single context. The discussion was lively, with students offering their own experiences in language use and change.

Then I taught a minilesson on two frequently misunderstood features of AAVE: the habitual *be* and zero copula. The habitual *be* is an aspectual

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FIGURE 2. Student Response Excerpts

- Person can code switch when they come back to their hometown and meet their relatives and old friends who live in that community. In this case, person code switch so they can blend in with the community which is similar to Calpurnia's code switch.
- There are times when more formal language is necessary, and there are times when casual language can be used.
- Code switching is a natural thing humans do to be recognized as part of another culture.
- An example of code-switching is if you are in a friend group and they talk differently you would have to talk differently to fit into the group and then if you were then to go to your class you would have to talk normal to your teacher because she probably wouldn't understand what you were saying.
- Let's say that someone perhaps was born in a black family and was always used to listen to "black English" all the time. However, when this person goes to a public school she will mostly hear the "common English", therefore learning both.

feature of AAVE that indicates regular or habitual actions; the frequent confusion of its purpose by mainstream English speakers was discussed earlier. Zero copula is the omission of auxiliary verbs that can be contracted (with the exception of first-person singular *I am*): *He crazy. She confusing me.* Devyani Sharma and John R. Rickford explain its frequency as such: "Predication without a copula, or zero copula, is most frequent with a *gon(na)* future or a progressive (*she Ø gon tell him; she Ø walking*), least frequent before a noun phrase (*he Ø a man*), and of intermediate frequency before a locative or adjective (*he Ø in the car; she Ø happy*)" (54). The elimination of these auxiliaries is simply a more complete contraction than those used in mainstream English. One student remarked that it seemed just as reasonable to her to eliminate the auxiliary entirely as to more incompletely contract it, as in *he's funny*. This is a particularly astute point for a 15-year-old mainstream English speaker. And she reached it 20 years earlier in her life than I did in mine.

Fish versus Young: Standoff in the Classroom

Although my purpose was to expose students to academic writing in a stigmatized English variety to help them develop an appreciation of such varieties, I wanted them to see the whole picture, which meant including the other side of the argument. So we started with an excerpt from the blog post Young was responding to: Stanley Fish's "What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3." I read a lengthy excerpt of it aloud as the class read along, and every couple of paragraphs or so, we would outline on the board Fish's argument: his claims, his evidence, and his appeals. At one point, we contemplated whether or not Fish alienates some of his audience by asserting that "high schools and middle schools are not teaching writing skills in an effective way, if they are teaching them at all." The students were clearly understanding the idea of audience and purpose as well as developing an understanding of argument organization. We ended with the paragraph where Fish tells the reader, "And if students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturism declare, 'I have a right to my own language,' reply, 'Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I'm here to teach you another one.'

(Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it." It was important to end on this note, I felt, because it sums up Fish's argument, and Young uses this particular passage as an area of contention in his response. It also marked a good stopping point in Fish's text: we could outline several claims preceding this statement and evidence to support them.

On completing the Fish excerpt, we reviewed his argument to be sure that everyone understood his claims and evidence. Then I polled the class: "How many of you agree with Fish, that speakers of other Englishes need to leave their home language at home and learn and use only standard English for school purposes?" Unsurprisingly, virtually every hand in the class went up. Fish's argument makes a lot of sense to mainstream English speakers: it does stand to reason that people will not do as well in school or in business if they cannot adequately wield the language of power.

Students then got into groups of four, and I gave each student a copy of an excerpt from Vershawn Young's piece with the instructions that they needed to read the article aloud to one another. After every two or three paragraphs, they should stop to identify Young's claims, evidence, and appeals. They would need someone in the group to keep track of the argument, and they could choose one person in the group to read the whole thing or rotate readers, but the aloud element of the reading assignment was nonnegotiable. I also explained that they might find the writer's language challenging. Then I set the students loose to read aloud a codemeshed text written primarily in AAVE.

At first, it was comical. They struggled to discover the cadences of the writing. They translated their reading into mainstream syntax even when it wasn't precisely what was on the page. Most laughed at their own difficulty; a few were visibly frustrated.

But something happened three or four paragraphs in: the students started to recognize Young's argument and why he makes it using mostly AAVE. I overheard students say things like, "This is way harder to read than regular English," and, "So he's using his black writing to make a point about using black language," and, "If this is hard for us, what must it be like for kids who talk like this to read *everything* at school?" We discussed Young's argument and claims

as a class and wrote the outline on the board alongside Fish's. Now I polled the class again: "How many of you agree with Fish, that speakers of other Englishes need to leave their home language at home and learn and use only standard English for school purposes?" This time, fewer than half of the hands went up. The students' struggle with a text in a much less familiar variety of English made an impression on them. Young's argument was loud and clear.

Beyond Calpurnia, Young, and Fish

This was just one lesson. One day out of the 90 days of instruction I see each of my students. But that one day—that one lesson—made a difference in many students' perceptions about language. And it has gotten me thinking about other ways I might use multilingual pieces in my classroom. I hope to expand my use of multilingual works and those written in marginalized Englishes. I don't profess to change attitudes and understandings overnight or by myself. But I do intend to make a difference. If this white girl's epiphany can lead to similar epiphanies in similar speakers, then I'll be doing my share. *EJ*

Note

1. Code-switching in linguistics is the use of more than one dialect, variety, or language—or code—within a single context. In education, however, code-switching has come to signify a student's decision to use a particular code rather than another based on the formality of the situation. It is this second definition to which I refer here.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In the essay "Mother Tongue," Amy Tan explains that she "began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with." How these "different Englishes" or even a language other than English contribute to identity is a crucial issue for adolescents.

In this lesson from ReadWriteThink.org, students explore this issue by brainstorming the different languages they use in speaking and writing, and when and where these languages are appropriate. They write in their journals about a time when someone made an assumption about them based on their use of language, and share their writing with the class. Students then read and discuss Amy Tan's essay "Mother Tongue." Finally, they write a literacy narrative describing two different languages they use and when and where they use these languages. http://bit.ly/19nHzOc