

## **Learning to Listen to all the Different Voices: A Teacher's Journey to Shifting Paradigms in Language Variation and Diversity**

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As a veteran educator, I prided myself on embracing a pedagogy that valued diversity in the classroom. However, it wasn't until I enrolled in a graduate course in language variation and learning that I was challenged to deeply explore my evolving language paradigm.

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### **Shifting Paradigms Starting with Self**

If you believe that children's language can be "deficient," then you might be tempted to try to improve their language in some way. If you believe on the contrary that the concept of language deficit does not make much sense, and that there is nothing wrong with the language of any normal child, then you will probably believe that schooling should not interfere with a child's dialects. And if you believe that linguistic disadvantage arises largely from people's intolerance and prejudice towards language differences, then you will probably try to change people's attitudes to language. (Stubbs, 2002, p.79)

If the quote above were actually a quiz of multiple choice, could you use your natural wit and skill to apply process of elimination and cleverly whittle down the responses to identify the “best” answer? Many people probably could. However, what happens when you know the correct response but your actions and ideologies force you to select a different choice? I share this example as a metaphor for my experience in the shifting and reshaping of my language paradigm. As an elementary educator and a first-year doctoral student enrolled in a course in language variation, when I came across this quote in my research, it deeply resonated with me. In the margins of the text, I wrote a question for myself: “Where do you stand?” As my language course continued, I had the opportunity to reflect on that question from a new perspective. I became positioned to understand language as socially situated, and as the core of the human experience.

### **The Origins of a Language Paradigm**

I had the privilege of growing up in a biracial family. I refer to my racial background as such, because it afforded me the opportunity to dually participate in language and cultural variances. I have a White mother and Black father. It is not so much the racial difference as it is the individual social and cultural backgrounds of my mom and dad which led to the speech differences between

them. Barrett (1999) contends that speakers' "utterances reflect the nuances of identity in multilayered ways that cannot be broken down into smaller components" (Fought, 2013, p.389). My mom grew up in the suburbs of Buffalo, New York. Her family was well-educated, and working middle-class. My dad on the other hand grew up in a small predominantly Black neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee. He came from a working-class family with a single mom. These "multilayers" of my parents' upbringing contribute to their identity(ies), which ultimately connect to their language use and child-rearing practices.

Both of my parents speak, what I always thought of as "Standard English". However, I now realize that by labeling one variation of English as the "standard", other variations are then subsequently positioned as inferior. Today I recognize the gravity of the assumptions inherent in this term, and avoid using it. While both of my parents use a socially-privileged dialect, my dad often employs stylistic, semantic, and speech variances situated within an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that my mom does not use. For example, my dad will say, "I'm going to the store right quick", or "We gone leave round ten...What time it is?" He may use the word "ain't". Growing up, my sister and I were acutely aware of these subtle dialectal differences used by our dad. At times we would poke fun of him, or curiously inquire about a phrase he used or the way he

pronounced a word. In retrospect, the linguistic observations I made as child formed the beginnings of my language paradigm. In making fun of the subtle speech differences of my dad, I recognize that I had subconsciously learned to privilege one English dialect over another.

I recall upper elementary and middle school as a time when I began to play with language. In elementary school, my friend had a book of hand-clap games and rhymes for “Black girls”. We would sit for hours melodically singing the chants and clapping the beat. These lyrics and rhymes were in AAVE dialect. I briefly considered that I could easily flow from this dialect, to the socially and academically privileged dialect. Soon, I began to recognize the value in being able to speak other dialects, such as AAVE. The versatility allowed me to fluidly participate in both predominantly White and Black social and professional circles and institutions. I began to connect pride in my ability to code-switch and utilize my dual-culture upbringing as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). “By code-switching, individuals can capitalize on the linguistic values associated with both a heritage language and a variety with broader regional, social, and national implications” (Fought, 2013, p. 393). Therefore, code-switching abilities must be (re)considered as “linguistic tools”, an asset that allows one to participate in varied spaces and successfully communicate with multiple groups (Taylor,

Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008). As a young adult, I came to know the value inherent in different dialects as well as languages. However it was not until I was in my third year of teaching when I began to see the larger and systemic issues connected to language.

### **The Intersection of Language and Schooling**

During my third year teaching, I was hired to teach a summer school reading program for students who had failed the state achievement test. In my class that summer were two ELL refugee students from Cambodia. Neither girl could speak or read English well, one hardly at all. The entire structure of the program seemed to disregard any cultural differences, and unjustly set the same expectations for immigrant and refugee students. I couldn't help but question the purpose. What messages were being sent to these students? By positioning them as deficient by way of language, what claims were educators asserting about their identity? By condemning and penalizing students in school for not speaking English, or in particular, a privileged academic dialect, we use power structures and authority to cultivate a sense of inferiority in students. In doing so we effectively and systematically chip away at their very identity and self-concept thereby devaluing them as human beings.

This was an eye-opener for me in terms of the inequity embedded in education policy. Espinosa (2009) asserts the following in regard to young Dual Language Learners: “Depending on the language-learning context, negative emotions such as anxiety and self-consciousness may interfere with learning and limit the child's ability to benefit from instructional strategies developed for his or her support” (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010, p. 377). Educators, researchers, and policy-makers cannot continue to ignore the voices of minority and ethnic students, less, marginalization of students is perpetuated.

### **Teaching Tolerance through Language Diversity**

If the world of policy is too large to tackle and too slow going, I've learned small changes can occur at the schoolhouse level almost instantly by purposefully activating conversations on race, culture, and language variation with students and creating a space for new meaning making experiences. Presenting language in a critical light for children affords them the opportunity to expand upon on their own language paradigms. For example, during a unit on the contributions of Cesar Chavez, I decided to take a strong focus on Chavez's schooling experiences and the discrimination he faced as an English language learner. I shared a powerful video clip with my third grade students from a social experiment hidden camera show called, “*What Would You Do?*” This particular episode featured a Spanish speaking

family ordering food at a restaurant in the U.S. while a white male taunts and teases the mother, telling her to “speak American” or “Go to Taco Bell”. During this video clip some students sat quiet and wide-eyed. Others couldn’t contain their disapproval, and yelled out to the antagonistic man that he was wrong. After the video segment, students were free to share their own experiences and thoughts on language discrimination. Creating a space for dialogue on these issues can aid students in thinking more deeply and critically about language variation so that they may display both confidence and tolerance in embracing their own language varieties and those of others. Lisa Delpit suggests the following for teachers:

First they should recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity. To suggest that this form is “wrong” or, even worse, ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family (1995, p. 53).

Seeing the impact of bringing critical language conversations into the classroom with my students prompted me to extend this opportunity to the teachers with whom I work. Therefore, this year I started a professional book club at my school. My hope is that it will serve as a long term platform for professional development through exposure to critical literature and discourse so teachers may begin to reconceptualize language diversity in our classrooms through culturally-

responsive pedagogy and paradigm shifts. Thus far, our conversations have certainly extended to race, stereotypes, privilege, and access.

### **New Experiences and an Evolving Paradigm**

I have been fortunate to work at a wonderful public elementary school for the majority of my teaching career. My school is widely known for its academic status as a top-performing school in the district as well as the state. However, it is the sense of community and the relationships among the students, families, and staff that speak loudest to those familiar with our school. The atmosphere is warm and supportive, and one in which the values of care and respect are at the forefront. Nestled in the historic neighborhoods of a major metropolitan city in Georgia, my school serves a population of roughly 600 students. Currently the approximate racial /ethnic makeup of the student body is as follows: 60% white, 20% Black, 14% Asian, and less than 6% identifying as Hispanic, Indian, Pacific Islander, or students who identify as one or more races (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). While the racial composition reflect a somewhat diverse mix of students' cultural and linguistic diversity, there is more homogeneity among students and families in terms of social economic status. The majority of students come from upper middle-class families, with parents who are well-educated, working professionals. But educators, administration, and teacher leaders at my



school recognize that these characteristics do not reflect the entire student body. Indeed there are students whose lived experiences consist of single-parent households, homelessness, low socioeconomic status, limited access to resources, and undervalued home language and literacy practices.

The desire to examine these issues of inequity in a school and community context has prompted us to create a new initiative; a space to better understand all of our students and explore our own cultural biases that may exist. As luck would have it, shortly after the administration began efforts to partner with university professors and a representative from the National Association of Multicultural Education, we received news that our school district would redraw the local school boundary lines in order to relieve severe overcrowding in certain parts of the district. The rezoning efforts would address a cluster of schools which serve a predominantly Latino community. This news meant that my school would take part in these efforts by enrolling nearly 300 English Language Learners, all of whom speak Spanish as their native language.

To say this will be a big change is an understatement, especially considering our ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) classes are currently made up of less than five percent of the student body. It is also important to consider the additional changes and challenges. Many of these students come from a lower

socioeconomic background and have parents who do not have transportation. They will be bussed from their former neighborhood school, near their homes, approximately 30 minutes across town. The logistics of this change have brought resistance from many families.

In speaking with teachers and parents at my school, feelings range from apprehension to excitement. What will academics look like now? How many ESOL teachers will we need? How do we help our new students fully participate in all that our school has to offer? What if I can't speak Spanish? Many teachers have expressed an interest in becoming ESOL certified. For me, the chance to work with ELLs in a larger capacity is serendipitous. My school has a wealth of resources at our fingertips and are positioned to gain support from the district as we begin this endeavor. There is much we can offer these students. Additionally, I know there is much we can learn from these students! I hope to use our culture and diversity initiative as a platform to support other teachers in their understandings of students of diverse backgrounds and their philosophies on language acquisition and development.

While there is great promise and possibility in this rich blending of backgrounds, there is also the reality that if students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the school district do not fully embrace this rezoning effort,

the potential for two schools within a school will exist (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

This kind of de facto division is highly undesirable, and must be proactively avoided. A positive mind frame, rather than a deficit perspective will be necessary and critical.

Today, as I reflect on the journey of my own language paradigm shifts, I am excited about where I am and where I am going. I realize that agency is a key factor in the development of my paradigms. I am now more perceptive to the power, assumptions, and ideologies that languages and dialects carry. I know I must consciously act upon my learning and new understandings to make an impact in the school and community. Thus, rather than adding to a hegemonic social discourse that emphasizes linguistic differences as deficiencies, I have chosen to espouse and reify languages and their variations as instruments of identity, unity, and agency.

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