



Shifting Paradigms Starting with Self

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In this article, a practicing teacher and doctoral student reflects on her attitudes about English language learners, and she analyzes how those attitudes influenced the relationships she had with past students. She also discusses how interactions with those students caused her attitudes to shift and change while giving advice to current classroom teachers.

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Introduction

The story of my language epistemology seems fairly straightforward. I am a middle class, White girl, raised by two parents who are both college educated. What, if any, language challenges could I have faced growing up, attending school, and working as a teacher? As it turns out, quite a few. Not only am I a middle class, White girl, but I am a *Southern* middle class, White girl. Instead of getting a shopping cart at the grocery store, we always put our food in a buggy. Whenever

we were getting ready to leave our house on Sunday mornings, we were fixin' to go to church. Any verbalized criticism was prefaced or followed by "bless his/her heart."

During my childhood, though, things began to change in my community. Many out-of-state companies moved to Georgia, bringing many of their out-of-state employees. New friends from Michigan and New York often criticized the way native Southerners speak. I remember my aunt telling us she felt very insulted and left a restaurant when the waitress said she would never be able to understand "people down here." At the same time, new friends from different countries moved into our community, speaking new languages I had never heard before. Their language practices also existed on the margins as many stores, restaurants, and schools operated under an "English Only" policy.

Reading this, you would think I would be overwhelmed by the injustice of it all. The fact that another group of people came to my home and told me my way of speaking was wrong should engender feelings of anger and indignation. To see my new friends discriminated against because they spoke languages other than English should have empowered me to stand up for my linguistic rights as well as

those of others, but that is not what happened. Instead, I turned to those more linguistically marginalized than me, and I criticized their ways of speaking.

I have, since then, evolved, but I cannot truly understand how my paradigms regarding language have shifted until I examine my past language experiences. I have divided my story into three acts. Act One, called Othered English, describes an incident in my early childhood which caused me to internalize negative attitudes about my own ways of speaking. Act Two, called Conventional Wisdom, explores the time in my life when I subscribed to an English-only way of thinking. Act Three, called Language Awakening, analyzes events which began to change and evolve my attitude about language. Finally, I conclude with what I have learned and make recommendations for teachers.

Act One: Othered English

I am 7 years old. I am the youngest child in my family, and the youngest grandchild on both sides of the family. My Uncle Jeff and Aunt Pam have just had a baby, and I am thrilled. Babies are so cute and precious; I can't wait to hold him and play with him and read him books. My mother takes me to the hospital, and I get to see him for the first time. I am beaming. I am a proud cousin.

A week later, we are gathered at my grandmother's house. Jeff shows the video of Steven's birth. I am in the video, holding Steven and wondering why he doesn't have any teeth.

"Wow!" Jeff says, "You sound so country!" Everyone laughs, and I am embarrassed. Being country means being stupid. It means that I am not smart, which is valued in my family of teachers. From this point on, I try not to sound country.

According to Preston (2013), attitudes about language variation often coincide with attitudes about groups of people. He studied the attitudes of Americans from different areas of the country and asked participants in his study to create maps of the United States by labeling geographic regions. Participants from Michigan labeled areas in the south Rebel City and Hillbillies. These labels reflect stereotypes about Southerners being ignorant and racist. Furthermore, these labels fail to take into account the ethnic and linguistic variety found among Southerners.

Unfortunately, speakers within linguistically marginalized groups sometimes adopt negative attitudes such as these. In the vignette above, my uncle judged me by the way I spoke on his home video. By characterizing my

speech as “country”, my uncle was sending several implicit messages. First, people living in the “country” have historically had access to fewer resources and opportunities. Many people living in the “country” work in agriculture, a job that pays little with few chances for upward mobility. According to Ash (2013), occupation is a major defining feature of social class, and those using non-Standard or Othered varieties of English typically are considered members of the working class. Based on these factors, many “country” people are wrongfully characterized as being uneducated and low class. My grandmother, for instance, was the daughter of a sharecropper but graduated from high school. She was eligible for nursing school, however, school tuition kept her from realizing that dream. Therefore, my grandmother was not stupid or uneducated. She simply lacked the financial resources to further her education.

Though he may not have meant it, I interpreted my uncle’s comment to mean that I sounded uneducated and poor, and I internalized these negative stereotypes. As a result, I began neutralizing my Southern accent in almost all contexts. By making these conscious choices regarding my language use, I developed an identity as a smart girl who would achieve success as an adult (Kiesling, 2013; Kirkham, 2013).

Act Two: Conventional Wisdom

I am a first year teacher, and I am struggling. I am failing to connect with one of my classes of 7th grade students. When I was in school, I was taught to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention. I assume that these behaviors show that students are learning, and part of my struggle comes from placing these same expectations on my students. I feel like I have no control of the classroom, so one day when the students begin conversing in Spanish, I say, "Excuse me! Speak English!"

This statement is met with resounding boos. "You're a racist, Miss!" one student yells from the back of the classroom.

That night, I go home and cry. Not because my feelings are hurt, but because I realize my students are right.

According to Chambers (2013), "all societies tolerate and foster social judgments of language use, and typically integrate them into communal ethos...where they become part of the institutional mandates of schools, government offices, and professional societies" (p. 4). In the United States, these social judgments tend to divide speakers into three groups: speakers of Standard English, speakers of non-Standard English, and speakers of other languages. Standard English speakers find their dialect of English being spoken in the schools,

government offices, and professional societies Chambers (2013) speaks of. The inability to communicate effectively in this dialect denies people access to what Delpit (1995) calls the “culture of power,” which affords greater privileges to speakers of Standard English and places non-Standard English speakers and speakers of other languages at greater disadvantages.

The terms Standard and non-Standard English are problematic within themselves. The term Standard English gives higher status to this group of speakers. It assumes that this dialect of English is a standard, to which all other speakers should aspire. The term non-Standard English assumes a deficit view. It implies that speakers of these dialects make haphazard mistakes in their speaking even though dialects such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) follow rules and patterns that are not haphazard at all (Fought, 2013). In the rest of this paper, I will refer to Standard English as the power dialect of English, drawing on Delpit’s notion of the “culture of power”. Non-standard dialects will be referred to as Othered dialects to show their social location on the margins.

Negative attitudes associated with the language practices of speakers of Othered dialects and speakers of other languages have the potential to destroy the positive relationships teachers have with these speakers. When I told my

students to speak English only, I believed that I was giving them access to the culture of power. How will they ever succeed if they do not speak English, which is required in schools, government offices, and businesses? Once they stop speaking Spanish and focus on English, then they will acquire the power dialect at a much faster rate. When the students pushed back at my request to speak English and called me a racist, I realized that my thinking was flawed.

While I might have fooled myself into thinking I was helping my students, when confronted, I realized what I was really trying to do was control them by forbidding them from speaking in a language I did not know. Since I had struggled with classroom management from the beginning of the year, this request truly represented a last ditch effort to get students to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention. I had wrongly equated compliance and control with learning, which ultimately led to chaos. Though it was extremely painful at the time, this experience helped me to begin to examine and analyze the climate of my classroom and my attitudes about language.

I would encourage other teachers to reflect on the ways in which they encourage students to respond during class. Are these ways aimed at getting students involved in learning or are they meant to control behavior? If the answer

is the latter, then teachers need to reflect on how these practices could be changed to encourage students to participate without marginalizing their language practices.

Act Three: Language Awakening

It is my third year teaching. I am trying to learn important lessons from my past mistakes. I am still teaching English language learners and making conscious efforts to welcome Spanish and other languages like Vietnamese into my classroom. The effects of this new outlook are amazing. My students and I get along great! They find out my birthday and bring food, so we can celebrate together. At Christmas time, they make me cards, and on Valentine's Day, I get flowers.

One challenge I still have, though, is engaging my students in writing. "I don't like writing, Miss," or "I don't know what to say" are often said when it is time to write. I decide to share with my students some of my own writing: a story of my most embarrassing moment. In this story, my 4th grade teacher throws a chalkboard eraser when my back is turned. It hits me on the butt, and everyone in the class sees and laughs. To make matters worse, the teacher apologizes in a way I find very insincere as he is still smiling and laughing while saying sorry.

As I finish reading this memoir, I ask the students to tell me their thoughts. One student raises his hand. He stands up and says enthusiastically, "I would pick up it and throw it at him. I would say, 'you bastard!'" Some children nod in agreement. Others, who understand the weight a word like bastard carries, know that saying it is against school rules. They know cussing in class gets a two-day stay in In School Suspension (ISS). They look at me with shock on their faces as if to say, "You're going to let him get away with that?"

One student finally says, "You let him off, Miss! You let him off!"

"What did I do?" the enthusiastic student says.

"You say a bad word, man!"

"I did?" He looks at me, realizing what the consequences will be. He turns red and starts apologizing, but I interrupt him.

"Yes, you did say a bad word," I tell him, "But you're right. He was acting like the word you said."

Even though I had made strides to make my classroom an inviting place for speakers of all languages, I still had students who were reluctant to speak to me or with others. Their affective filters often were heightened during my class because it focused on the study of English (Krashen, 1987). While some students

were fearless, others would ask their friends to ask me questions because they were afraid of saying the wrong thing. They also knew I only spoke English and could not converse with me in their first language.

The enthusiastic student in the vignette above had attained a high level of English proficiency using grammatical structures. He was able to produce spoken language that followed the rules of the power dialect. However, he did not understand the social implications of using certain vocabulary. He genuinely did not think the word “bastard” was a curse word. When I saw him fully realize what he said, I took a moment to reflect before acting. If I showed disapproval, he would feel further embarrassment. If I wrote him up, I would scare those students unwilling to talk to me even further. Mahar (2001) discusses how students who lack access to the power dialect often face disciplinary issues as they negotiate the social aspects of school. Did I want this student, who strongly engaged in the activity, to be punished for relating to my story?

The point of this class was to encourage (not force) students to use English. If they feared being written up because they did not fully understand the language, then I would be the only one doing any talking, or I would experience the same type of push-back that was so common in my classroom my first year

teaching. I decided not to punish the student and to agree with his word choice because I wanted to show him and his classmates that they should not fear participating in class discussion, especially when they were willing to take a chance using the new language they were acquiring. I never had another instance of cussing in class again and noticed more students participating in discussion. Once I established that students were safe to take risks with language, they began to do so.

At this point, I really began listening to and appreciating the contributions of my English Language Learners. Looking back, I feel like this moment marked an important shift in my thinking about language. I realized it is impossible to consider language without context. When I look at the context surrounding the enthusiastic student's response to my story, his reaction was appropriate. From that point on, I tried to discard some of my more rigid rules regarding language use (and school rules). Anytime language use became an issue in my classroom, I tried to consider all the contributing factors before making judgments about what was appropriate or correct.

I would also encourage other teachers to consider context before reacting to some of the sticky language situations that occur in our day-to-day interactions

with students. We should always ask ourselves what the purpose of the discussion activity is and how students were responding to that purpose before we react. If, like the student in the vignette above, their response aligns with the intended purpose, then I would recommend erring on the side of forgiveness if the delivery is not ideal. I also recommend explicitly telling students how their language choices could lead to misunderstandings in the future. Though I did not punish my enthusiastic student, I made sure he understood that his word choice could lead to trouble. While I wanted to encourage his participation in class discussion, I also did not want to set him up for future trouble if he ever used that word in school again. By fully considering context, teachers can help students develop their understandings of language in a safe, respectful classroom environment.

Conclusion

My understandings and attitudes about language have changed and shifted dramatically over the course of my lifetime. As I look ahead, I am excited at the prospect of continuing to grow and learn. Along the way, I will use these important lessons to guide my future thinking: I will not allow the judgments of other to influence the way I see myself. When I judge others based on the ways

they use language, I rob myself of getting to know their authentic selves.

Language is a means of expression, not control. Always consider context when listening to what others are saying.

Other teachers can read about my past experiences. They can see the lessons I have learned based on the interactions I have had with my students. But, I would also encourage them to reflect on their personal experiences with language and with their students as I have done. What lessons can be learned from your stories? How can you continue to grow based on these experiences? How will you help students see that all of their language practices have value and meaning both in and outside the classroom?

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