De-centering English: Highlighting the Dynamic Nature of the English Language to Promote the Teaching of Code-Switching

White describes classroom activities that help de-center students’ views of English as a static discursive norm and demonstrate the inherent power in different forms of “English.”

When students enter my English class, they should leave their ‘cultural hats’ at the door. In my classes, I’m going to require that students speak and use proper English. Period.” This was the reaction of one of my English language arts methods students while we were discussing the role of students’ native and culturally imbued discursive practices in schools (in other words, high school students’ liberal use of Ebonics/African American Vernacular English and popular-culture-induced slang). Her views were far from unique. Nods of agreement showed that this opinion was shared by many of her peers. My lesson on making use of the dynamic nature of English and the many forms it takes across and within cultures certainly wasn’t going as planned.

My lesson goal had been to get the students to see that though we should teach the conventions of Standard English, we should also acknowledge and even celebrate the unique and highly effective forms of discourse that students bring with them into the classroom. I was proposing that not only does a broader view of what counts as appropriate classroom discourse promote an inclusive English classroom, it creates a culturally responsive and inclusive foundation from which to teach students code-switching to Standard English, the use of which is an essential part of what Lisa Delpit has called the “codes of power.” We can, I argued, use students’ native “ways with words” (Heath) as starting points from which to teach them how to use Standard English. Instead of viewing our K–12 students’ respective language usage as deficits that we should squelch, we could value these unique discursive forms, use them for code-switching purposes, and thus better induce students to add Standard English “to their existing [language] repertoire” (Kutz 85).

However, my students (and many other pre-service teachers), who were only weeks away from their student teaching semester, had a narrow—and I posit an ethnocentric—view of what counts as appropriate language practices in the classroom. They saw “English” as a rigidly defined set of unchanging norms and their role as English teachers to be language police. Their views mirrored both the hyperbolic rhetoric of opponents to Oakland’s infamous attempt to acknowledge “Black Vernacular English” in schools in the 1990s (see Gayles and Denerville) and, more recently, proponents of Arizona’s new controversial immigration laws. More importantly, my students held views that could, when put into classroom practice, silence and alienate the students whom they most need to engage in their English classes: those who speak non-Standard English dialects.

These fears prompted me to attempt something to “de-center” my students’ sense of English and, in so doing, to highlight the inherent value in numerous forms of English communication. I created—and have subsequently employed in my methods classes—what seem to be effective means of de-centering students’ views of English as a static discursive norm and code-switching activities that demonstrate the inherent power in different forms of...
“English.” Below I present these lessons and briefly discuss their impact on my students’ thinking.

**English Teachers as English Police: Language as Static**

In my English language arts methods class, one preservice teacher said that a primary part of teaching English is to teach the “rules” of the English language and to enforce those rules so that future students would learn that English rules stay the same and that people need to follow them “to be successful in our country.” (The use of “our country” is telling; it suggests a cultural/linguistic norm based on white, Western linguistic codes of power.) Though this preservice teacher was no doubt well-intentioned, the attitude expressed does not correspond with more contemporary views of language and literacy. This view ignores the fact that language is socially mediated; we use and re-create language to meet our social and cultural needs (Fairclough; Gee; Lave and Wenger; Street; Wertsch). Correspondingly, as cultures change, languages change. Thus, our lexicon is always growing and changing; we add new words constantly while words whose contexts are no longer valid die a quiet death. For example, at the same time terms such as voice mail, digitize, and microwave have become common, words such as icebox and forsooth and even motorcar have largely disappeared from the English lexicon. A language with by far the largest number of words of any language, English is constantly changing and adapting to the needs of our society. This student’s views also ignore research that suggests that simply discounting or ignoring the power of students’ culturally imbued discursive styles in the classroom setting silences them and pushes them further away from the English curricula we are trying to teach (White, 2007, in press).

To emphasize the ever-changing nature of English, my students engage in an activity in which they read, interpret, and then answer questions about two canonical pieces of English literature: Beowulf and Canterbury Tales (see fig. 1). The questions associated with these two texts are similar to those that high school students might encounter when reading texts in their own English classrooms (answering questions about the plot, character, themes, inferred meanings, and specific questions about details designed to require close textual reading).

Seldom are students—individually, in groups, or as a whole class—able to make much sense of the first text or answer the corresponding questions (though some use the obvious context clue “Beowulf” in the text and remember reading translated versions of the text in high school classes). Most often, students simply give up on trying to answer the Beowulf questions. They shrug their shoulders or look away in response to my questions. When they do respond to my repeated inquiries, they often claim that the text is “impossible” because it is, as a student said, “not in English.”

These same students have mixed success with answering the Canterbury Tales questions. College English majors and minors (who make up my course) tend to be more familiar with this canonical text (usually from modern English translations) and thus have more prior knowledge upon which to build. They are also generally able to interpret the Middle English sufficiently to answer these relatively simple questions. Nonetheless, there is a high degree of variance in students’ ability to answer these questions and the levels of frustration they have in so doing. Such variance speaks again to prior knowledge and to their familiarity with the language used within the text. Their ability to engage with the text is highly dependent on their ability to codeswitch between the Standard English of today and the English of 600 years ago.

More importantly for the purposes of this assignment, my students must then try to recite the original pieces as accurately as possible. Reciting Beowulf aloud and with accuracy (to Old English norms) is almost impossible. Thus, most students simply give up or make up pronunciations. However, it is possible to recite Canterbury Tales if one has knowledge of the oral language conventions of Middle English (something most undergraduate students do not possess). When student volunteers recite this passage, I frequently stop their reading to correct their pronunciations and emphasize their English language “deficits” (note the phonetic version of the passage above). My intent with this part

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of the activity is to act as the Middle English police, insisting that each reader speak in the “standard” form. While correcting students’ many flawed pronunciations, I remind them—generally in a lighthearted manner—that *Canterbury Tales* was written in Standard English and is part of the traditional curricular canon (things with which they should be intimately familiar).

Students who are native English speakers and who tend to hold a static view of English can see—and more importantly experience—how English is an ever-changing language and they can feel, albeit in a nontthreatening way, linguistic alienation within the English classroom. In short, the activities and readings demonstrate that English itself changes per the needs and uses of those who use it and that familiarity and practice with discursive styles affects one’s ability to understand and use it.

**Tupac: Lost in Translation**

Most college-aged students have some understanding of the concept of “lost in translation.” Frequently, they equate the term with differences in world languages, such as the confusion that results when non-English speakers encounter idioms in English. Students who have significant experience studying a foreign language or who grew up spea-
ing a language other than English tend to grasp the concept even more fully; they can describe how
concepts or words in one language do not corre-
pond with specific English counterparts (Spanish
speakers can certainly understand why the Chevy
Nova had to be renamed to sell in Spanish-speak-
ing nations). However, few students tend to see
the idea of “lost in translation” as it occurs within a
language. They generally fail to see the dynamic
nature of dialects and discourses within modern
American English and how such dialects are
uniquely positioned to express ideas and feelings
(and conversely, how the power of ideas can be lost
in translation when expressed in a standard form of
English). To highlight the power inherent in spe-
cific non-Standard English discursive forms, I have
my students translate a pop-culture-based passage
into “Standard English.” The students take a sec-
tion of Tupac Shakur’s “Just Me Against the
World” and create their own translation; Figure 2
is a class sample.

Once students have completed the activity we
share our translations, examine respective versions
of the passage, and discuss (or vote on) which one
holds the most power to move the audience.
Though each passage—the original and its transla-
tion—says the same thing (each has the same literal
message), the original, non-Standard English pas-
sage inevitably holds far more emotional and rhe-
torical power regardless of audience. Shakur’s
original version speaks loudest both to its intended
audience (young, urban youth) as well as to the pre-
dominantly middle- and upper-middle-class white
students in my methods courses. When discussing
our different translations, students last semester
said, “Ours just seems so, so . . .” “White,” chimed
in a peer, adding, “It’s like the language he [the
professor] would use.” A third student described
the translation above as “It’s like, antiseptic, bor-
ing.” Via 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.

To further highlight the effect of culturally im-
bued language styles on meaning, students are en-
couraged to do an activity I used while teaching
poetry and code-switching to urban high school Eng-
lish students: (1) translate their favorite songs into
Standard English; (2) translate more “traditional”
and canonical poetry, such as selected works of Emily
Dickinson, into hip-hop versions; (3) create a dia-
logue using a Creole/Cajun lexicon. Through such
activities students engage in active code-switching
to different discourses and, by doing so, make cultural
connections to language usage. Just as importantly,
they are forced to attempt using language forms with
which they are generally not proficient or comfort-
able. Such linguistic alienation is, I try to highlight,
what many non-Standard English speakers feel in our
classrooms.

FIGURE 2. Translation of Tupac Shakur’s Just Me
Against the World

Standard English student translation (class sample):
Can you understand what I see as my future?
I live in a stressful city; the police keep an eye out
for me
The housing projects are a violence place, people are
being hurt and killed
But I can’t leave behind this life,
I stay busy making money.
The witnessing of murders and seeing dead bodies in
abandoned buildings
Negatively influences children, causing them to have a
skewed view of life
They become addicted to the violence and from the
sounds of gunfire,
A sound they don’t even stop to think about, but will
they survive or fall prey to this same violence?
Not even aware
Maybe death is the only way he’ll understand—but it’s
too late
Because others are still dying—I’m losing my good
friends quickly
They’re being buried in cemeteries
I worry about this a lot, so much so I can’t see a future
I wonder, will I live? I really don’t have anyone who
loves me
I am headed for danger, I can’t trust people
I load my gun when I feel this terrible anger
I don’t want to make excuses, because this is my reality
Complaining doesn’t do any good; no one notices the
problem with our youth unless there’s gunfire
I’m all alone in my quest for recognition of the
problem.
De-centering English

Standard English Just Makes the Most Sense: Heidegger on Truth

While describing his feelings about different discourse norms in the classroom, one of the future English teachers said, “Using Standard English is important because, if for nothing else, it makes sense [than other forms]. It is something that we all can understand.” Figure 3 is meant to complicate the notion that Standard English is inherently more sensible or comprehensible than other forms. The passage itself, from Martin Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*, is written in Standard English. Moreover, it is also a relatively simple text in form: it rates a 10.6 grade level on the Flesch-Kincaid readability measurement. Ironically, interpreting this passage proves exceptionally difficult for virtually all of my students.

Students working on this passage, either in groups or as a whole class, spend inordinate amounts of time trying to decode it to come up with a meaning that makes sense to them. After much struggle—and what even they agree is far too much “time on task” with this relatively short passage, they come up with a number of possible definitions. Sometimes they come close to an effective definition (based on professional philosophers’ interpretations). Just as often, their interpretations are far from Heidegger’s intent.

More important, students simply give up on trying to understand the passage. Said one student recently, “It gives me a headache just trying to figure it out . . . it’s like the author is trying to make the concept impossible to understand by the way he has written it” (emphasis added). What this student expressed mirrors what many struggling readers and non-Standard English speaking students say about the texts we use in our high school English classes. 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. Philosophers understand Heidegger because they have learned to read, speak, and think in specific ways; they have learned to code-switch between everyday discursive practices and those they need for success within their field. Ironically, this student had the right idea; philosophers do sometimes use obtuse language to get readers to wrestle both with the text and with the ideas inherent in them. They know that uses of language have an effect on the meaning one takes from a text (or a discursive event).

“To Boldly Go” Is Simply Better Than “To Go Boldly”

Many will remember the famous tag line (above) from the opening of the 1960s television series *Star Trek*. Few, however, recognize that teachers and grammar purists for decades decried the use of such split infinitives; they saw such statements as “to boldly go where no man has gone before” as, if not grammatically incorrect, a poor stylistic choice. Some English teachers for years assumed that theirs

**FIGURE 3. Poetry, Language, Thought (Modern English)**

Truth is un-truth insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet-uncovered, the un-uncovered, in the sense of concealment. In unconcealedness, as truth, there occurs also the other “un-“ of a double restraint or refusal. Truth occurs as such in the opposition of clearing and double-concealing. Truth is the primal conflict in which, always in some particular way, the Open is won within which everything stands and from which everything withdraws itself as a being. Whenever and however this conflict breaks out and happens, the opponents, lighting or clearing and concealing, move apart because of it. Thus the Open of the place of conflict is won. The openness of this Open, that is, truth, can be what it is, namely this openness, only if and as long as it establishes itself within this Open. Hence there must always be some being in this Open, something that is, in which the openness takes its stand and against its constancy. In taking possession thus of the Open, the openness holds open the Open and sustains it. Setting and taking possession are here everywhere drawn from the Greek sense of *thesis*, which means a setting up in the unconcealed.

—Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (60–61)

**Based on this text—written in Standard English at a tenth-grade readability level (Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score: 10.6), answer the following questions:**

1. What is Heidegger’s thesis?
2. Briefly describe how Heidegger describes the nature of truth.
3. Rephrase the first few sentences into your own words.
was the job to protect English grammar from the changes wrought upon it from non-academic influences. They saw common usage as an enemy to good grammar. Yet, that most people today—including English teachers—fail to pay much attention to split infinitives is telling; it represents the dynamic nature of language and grammar as well as the importance of conveying an idea effectively over often arcane grammatical rules. The meaning of the iconic statement, “To boldly go where no man has gone before,” is perfectly clear (though gendered). Ironically, it might be—at least in part—due to its minor deviation in grammatical style (adhering instead to a more commonly used form of English) that this pop-culture catchphrase has so much staying power; it helps hook the average viewer with the greater message of the show.

Though many English teachers, grammarians, and lexicographers (in other words, language purists) may lament the fact, English is an ever-changing and dynamic language. Its norms, though somewhat stable, are also amenable to the changes of the society in which they are used. Our lexicon is always growing to account for the exponential growth in knowledge corresponding with the electronic age. Similarly, we use language for different purposes within a given society. We change the way we use language depending on the context in which we find ourselves (in other words, we consciously and unconsciously code-switch frequently throughout the average day). Because English is a dynamic language, we must reconceptualize our role as English teachers. To fully engage students (split infinitive intended), we should not adhere to an anachronistic and static view of English. Instead, we must acknowledge, accept, and even use different language forms within the classroom to make that classroom dynamic, inclusive, and relevant to students’ lives.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

“An Introduction to Beowulf: Language and Poetics” provides an introduction to the language and poetics of the epic poem. Although this lesson assumes students will read Beowulf in translation, it introduces students to the poem’s original Old English and explains the relationship between Old, Middle, and Modern English. Students are introduced to the five characters in the Old English alphabet that are no longer used in Modern English. Students translate a short, simple phrase from Old English; listen to a passage from the poem being read in Old English; and study important literary devices. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/introduction-beowulf-language-poetics-813.html