English Language Variation: Cultural Considerations and Educational Implications

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From school board meetings to dinner tables, the newly implemented Common Core educational standards have become an integral part of everyday conversations in America. Common Core has been designed such that a child’s academic skills progress from year to year. For example, for a child to succeed in third grade, they must have successfully mastered the required skills for second grade. Thus, in order for children to be successful at each grade level, it is imperative that they have built a strong foundation. One fundamental skill that children must master to be successful in all areas of common core is language. Vocabulary skills in particular are especially important for early language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Vocabulary skills are important for success on Common Core standards directly related to language, like literacy, and they are integral to success in all domains of learning. For example, children’s early vocabulary skills are strongly correlated with school readiness (Farkas & Beron, 2004), and with later math skills (Durham, Farkas, Hammer, et al., 2007). Recently, the importance of early vocabulary development received national attention. In the summer of 2014, President Barack Obama posted a video on the White House’s website highlighting the importance of early vocabulary development—calling it one of his “top priorities.” Yet despite this national attention, and the importance of early language skills for later academic success, educators have been slow to incorporate explicit language instruction in the classroom (Dickinson, 2011).

African-American English

Lack of explicit language instruction in the classroom negatively impacts all children. Unfortunately, this effect is especially devastating for children coming into the classroom from diverse language backgrounds. Within the classroom, Standardized American English (SAE) is the accepted language. However, many children do not speak SAE at home. For example, many African-American children speak African-American English (AAE), a variation of English. A recent study conducted by Dr. Makeba Wilborn and colleagues at Duke University found that in one elementary school in North Carolina, 50% of kindergarteners are speakers of AAE (Wilborn, Ruba, Lucca, et al., 2015). AAE, just like any other language, is structured, systematic, and rule governed (Stockman, 2010). For instance, in AAE, the verb “be” is systematically used alone to mark the future tense (e.g. “She be there later”).

When speakers of AAE enter the classroom, they are essentially speaking a different language than their teachers are using. At times, teachers treat this difference as a deficit. When children bring AAE into the classroom, teachers often respond by saying, “don’t speak that way” or “we speak English here.” By dismissing AAE without an explanation, teachers may be unintentionally sending a harmful message to children, namely, that their way of speaking is wrong. But this isn’t true, and it may cause speakers of AAE to struggle in school. African American children are simply speaking what they are surrounded by at home and with their friends—AAE. While using AAE may not be appropriate in traditional academic settings, there is nothing wrong with it.

Code Switching

Thus, it is important that we—as psychologists, parents, and educators—start to think about ways to change the narrative surrounding AAE in the classroom. By treating AAE as a difference in language as opposed to a deficit in language, teachers have the potential to greatly improve the academic success of AAE speakers (Stockman, 2010). One way that teachers can do this is by telling children that speaking SAE in the classroom does not need to come at the cost of speaking AAE in other contexts. In other words, teachers can teach “code switching,” which allows children to seamlessly switch between the rules of SAE and AAE depending on the context. In the classroom, speakers of AAE would use the language of school (SAE) and in other contexts, they would use the language of home (AAE).

Code switching requires children to do more than simply change their tone or cadence. It requires them to transition from one set of rules to another, the same way a speaker would do if switching from Spanish to English. Learning how to effectively code switch trains mental flexibility. Training mental flexibility has the potential to boost a variety of cognitive skills, such as executive functioning and literacy skills (Bialystock & Martin, 2004; Cartwright, 2008).

The Need for Explicit Language Instruction

It is important to keep in mind that children can’t learn how to code switch on their own. Code switching requires explicit instruction from teachers, parents, or others about the differences between SAE and AAE. To code switch, teachers can encourage students to...
analyze the demands of the setting (e.g., Where are they? Who is their audience?) and then intentionally choose the style that is appropriate for that specific setting. For example, saying, "A giraffe’s neck is long," may be appropriate at home or with friends speaking AAE, but in the classroom, "A giraffe’s neck is long" is the appropriate SAE translation for a school setting. Teachers can naturally integrate code switching into their teaching routines by coupling it with vocabulary instruction

(e.g., "a giraffe’s neck is elongated"). Spanish-speaking children are often provided with explicit instruction on how to speak the language of school. Shouldn’t African-American children be offered the same benefits?

America is a multicultural society. In order for any academic initiative—including Common Core—to be successful, it is imperative that we embrace this fact. One way that we can embrace diversity in the classroom by integrating explicit language instruction into curricula. By explicitly teaching children the language skills that underlie performance in the many areas of Common Core, teachers have the potential to greatly boost children’s performance in all areas. Thus, implementing explicit language instruction in the classroom can help create a stimulating, positive, and inclusive learning environment that benefits all children. 

in a good movie or a book. (Dr. Bob is a shameless advocate of his wife's books—to know Bob is to know his wife, Peggy Payne and her New York Times notable book, Sister India, or her recent book, Cobalt Blue—"Not for the faint of heart," he exclaimed)

He mentioned a variety of ways we may induce a healing altered state, such as when a stressed colleague will, after a very hard day, relax and enjoy a glass of good wine and her favorite steak (frozen and planned for urgent need) followed by a bubble bath with soothing music. Many people can use hypnosis for insomnia, since a light trance helps with falling asleep or is a pleasant place to wait patiently for sleep to come.

PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Bob uses a sort of psychological Aikido (and suggests physical Tai Chi to help reduce the risk of falls and to make falls less damaging if they do occur) to transform the often-negative energies attacking in therapy into neutrality or even positive possibilities. As a practicing psychologist, he often confronts negative energy. He mentions the Escher woodcut "Circle Limit IV" showing multiple images of two figures—one an angel in white, the other a devil in black—as descriptive of us all, in all relationships and situations, both dark and light. Dealing with the darker side of human experience, he teaches visualizing taking-in and neutralizing, or turning negative energy into more positive options and choices.

He regularly recommends a similar strategy found in the book, Aikido in Everyday Life (mostly about everyday life and very little about physical Aikido), to business people or others who encounter overly aggressive people or who have anger-management problems. He explained that Aikido (a martial art without punches or kicks), acknowledges that conflict is natural, unavoidable, and often healthy and teaches a carefully graduated use of force for dealing with confrontation, ranging from doing nothing, using humor, "leaving the field," monitoring one's breath, and "centering" or grounding oneself through a continuum of options before using lethal force.

Bob also highly recommends—for coping with complex professional issues—that psychologists find a close, supportive circle of people, possibly a group therapy, where they may talk about stressful issues and not feel judged. He has found that a mixed-gender group is most productive. He mentioned the book, I Don't Want to Talk About It, as highlighting some unique issues men have with intimacy (e.g., men sometimes restrict their personal emotional experience to lust or anger). Surprisingly, he encourages (nonsexual) relationships between group members outside of the group, specifically prescribing they bring those outside experiences and feelings back into group sessions.

About these interpersonal treatment groups, he cautioned that they be led by an experienced therapist who can facilitate genuine emotional intimacy and can recognize and deal with signs of problems, such as "transferral" anger or "insolvency," which could lead to inappropriate hostile or sexual behaviors. He prepares people extensively for groups with reading assignments, detailed discussion of written guidelines, and ideally a strong and credible relationship with him, so members are more accepting of his suggestions and the seemingly "crazy" things he will say.

Dr. Bob Dick also recommends the American Academy of Psychotherapists (http://aapweb.com/about/) and their journal, Voices, to all who practice the healing arts, with or without the use of hypnosis. Finally, he refers people to his web page (http://www.drbobdick.com/hypnosis/) where he describes "Brief Hypnosis Facts for Clients and Therapists," along with other resources (e.g., "How to Stand Out in a Competitive Market") for professionals and clients. Bob continues to be busy and actively leads various trainings and therapy groups in his part-time private practice.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE AT
WWW.NCPsychology.ORG.