Teaching Standard English: Whose Standard?

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When I was in the ninth grade, Mrs. Delaney, my English teacher, wanted to demonstrate the correct and incorrect ways to pronounce the English language. She asked Helen Draper, whose father owned several clothing stores in town, to stand and say "lawyer." Then she asked me, whose father owned a bar, to stand and say "lawyer." Everyone burst into laughter at my pronunciation.

What did Mrs. Delaney accomplish? Did she make me pronounce *lawyer* correctly? No. I say *attorney*. I never say *lawyer*. In fact, I've found substitutes for every word my tongue can't get around and for all the rules I can't remember.

For years I've played word cop on myself. I stop what I'm saying to think, "Objective or subjective case? Do I need *I* or *me* here? Hmmm. There's a *lay* coming up. What word can I substitute for it? *Recline*?"

And I've studied this stuff. After all, I've been an English teacher for almost fifteen years. I've gone through all of the *Warriner's* workbook exercises. I even found a lie/lay computer program and kept it in my head until I needed it in speech and became confused again.

Thanks to Mrs. Delaney, I learned early on that in our society language classifies me. Generosity, warmth, kindness, intelligence, good humor aren't enough—I need to speak correctly to make it. Mrs. Delaney taught me that the "melting pot" was an illusion. The real version of the melting pot is that people of diverse backgrounds are mixed together, and when they come out, they're supposed to look like Vanna White and sound like Dan Rather. The only diversity we celebrate is tacos and chop suey at the mall.

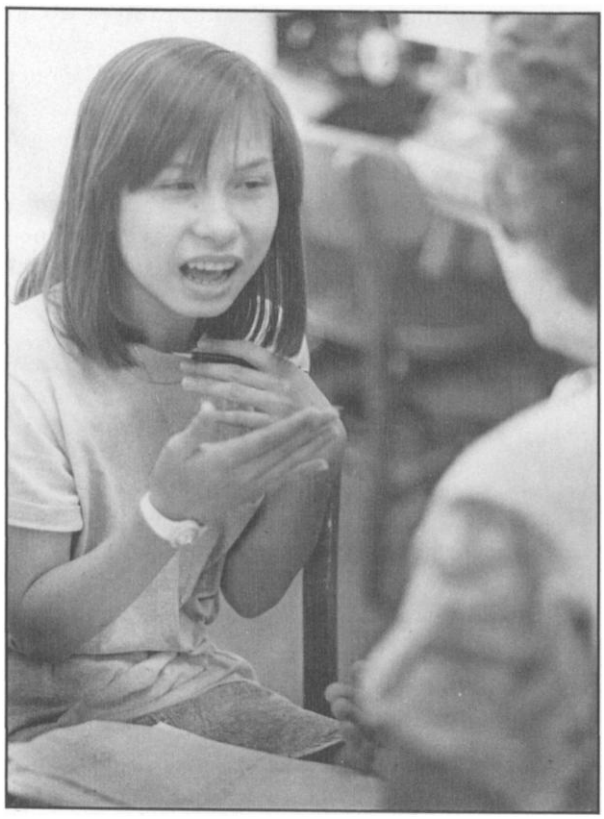
It wasn't until a few years ago that I realized grammar was an indication of class and cultural background in the United States and that there is a bias against people who do not use language "correctly." Even the terminology "standard" and "nonstandard" reflects that one is less than the other. English teachers are urged to "correct" students who speak or write in their home language. A friend of mine, whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower, never studied any of the grammar texts I keep by my side, but she can spot all of my errors because she grew up in a home where Standard English was spoken.

And I didn't, so I've trained myself to play language cop. The problem is that every time I pause, I stop the momentum of my thinking. I'm no longer pursuing content, no longer engaged in trying to persuade or entertain or clarify. Instead, I'm pulling *Warriner's* or Mrs. Delaney out of my head and trying to figure out how to say something.

"Ah, but this is good," you might say. "You have the rules and Mrs. Delaney to go back to. This is what our students need."

But it doesn't happen that way. I try to remember the rule or the catchy phrase that is supposed to etch the rule in my mind forever like "people never get laid," but I'm still not sure if I used it correctly. These side trips cost a lot of velocity in my logic.

Over the years my English teachers pointed out all of my errors—the usage errors I inherited from my mother's Bandon, Oregon, dialect, the spelling errors I overlooked, the fancy words I used incorrectly. They did this in good faith in the same way that, years later, I "corrected" my students' "errors" because I wanted them to know the rules. They were keys to a secret and wealthier society I



wanted them to be prepared to enter, just as my teachers wanted to help me.

And we should help kids. It would be misleading to suggest that people in our society will value my thoughts or my students' thoughts as readily in our home languages as in the "cash language" as Jesse Jackson calls it. Students need to know where to find help, and they need to understand what changes might be necessary, but they need to learn in a context that doesn't say, "The way you said this is wrong."

English teachers must know when to correct and how to correct—and I use that word uneasily. Take Fred, for example. Fred entered my first-year class last year unwilling to write. Every day during writing time I'd find Fred doodling pictures of Playboy bunnies on his Pee Chee. When I sat down and asked him why he didn't write, he said he couldn't.

I explained to him that in this class his writing couldn't be wrong because we were just practicing our writing until we found a piece we wanted to polish, in the same way that he practiced football every day after school but played games only on Fridays. His resistance lasted for a couple of weeks. Around him, other students struggled with their writing, shared it with the class on occasion, and heard positive comments. Certainly, the writing of his fellow students was not intimidating. At that point this class was tracked—and Fred was in the lowest track.

On October 1, after reading a story by Toni Cade Bambara (1972) about trusting people in our lives, Fred wrote for the first time: "I remember my next door neighbor trusted me with some money that she owed my grandmother. She owed my grandmother about 25 dollars." Fred didn't make a lot of errors. In this first piece of writing it looked as if he had basic punctuation figured out. He didn't misspell any words. And he certainly didn't make any usage errors. Based on this sample, he appeared to be a competent writer.

However, the biggest problem with Fred's writing was the fact that he didn't make mistakes. This piece demonstrates his discomfort with writing. He wasn't taking any risks. Just as I avoid *lawyer* and *lay*, he wrote to avoid errors instead of writing to communicate or think on paper.

When more attention is paid to the *way* something is written or said than to *what* is said, students' words and thoughts become devalued. Students learn to be silent, to give as few words as possible for teacher criticism.

Students must be taught to hold their own voices sacred, to ignore the teachers who have made them feel that what they've said is wrong or bad or stupid. Students must be taught how to listen to the knowledge they've stored up but which they are seldom asked to relate.

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Too often students feel alienated in schools. Knowledge is foreign. It's about other people, in other times (Bigelow 1990). At a conference I attended recently, a young woman whose mother was Puerto Rican and whose father was Haitian said,

> I went through school wondering if anyone like me had ever done anything worthwhile or important. We kept reading and hearing about all of these famous people. I remember thinking, "Don't *we* have anyone?" I walked out of the school that day feeling tiny, invisible, unimportant.

As teachers, we have daily opportunities to affirm that our students' lives and language are unique and important. We do that in the selections of literature we read, in the history we choose to teach (Bigelow 1989), and we do it by giving legitimacy to our students' lives as a content worthy of study.

One way to encourage the reluctant writers who have been silenced and the not-so-reluctant writers who have found a safe and sterile voice is to encourage them to recount their experiences. I sometimes recruit former students to share their writing and their wisdom as a way of underscoring the importance of the voices and stories of teenagers. Rochelle, a student in my senior writing class, brought a few of her stories and poems to read to my first-year students. Rochelle, like Zora Neale Hurston, blends her home language with Standard English in most pieces. She read the following piece to open up a discussion about how kids are sometimes treated as servants in their homes but also to demonstrate the necessity of using the language she hears in her family to develop characters:

> "I'm tired of washing dishes. Seems like every time our family gets together, they just got to eat and bring their millions of kids over to our house. And then we got to wash the dishes."
>
> I listened sympathetically as my little sister mumbled these words.
>
> "And how come we cain't have ribs like grownups? After all, ain't we grown?"
>
> "Lord," I prayed, "seal her lips while the blood is still running warm in her veins."
>
> Her bottom lip protruded farther and farther as she dipped each plate in the soapy water, then rinsed each side with cold water (about a two second process) until she felt the majority of suds were off.
>
> "One minute we lazy women that cain't keep the living room half clean. The next minute we just kids and gotta eat some funky chicken while they eat ribs."
>
> . . . Suddenly it was quiet. All except my little sister who was still talking. I strained to hear a laugh or joke from the adults in the living room, a hint that all were well, full and ready to go home. Everyone was still sitting in their same spots, not making a move to leave.
>
> "You ought to be thankful you got a choice."
>
> Uh-oh. Now she got Aunt Macy started. . . .

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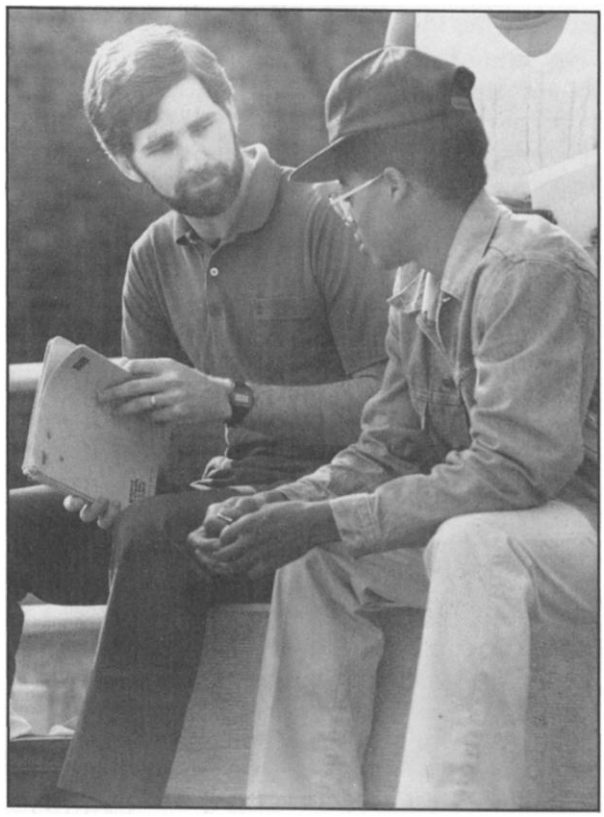
After reading her work, Rochelle talked about listening to her family and friends tell their stories. She urged the first-year students to relate the tales of their own lives—the times they were caught doing something forbidden, the times they got stuck with the dishes, the funny/sad events that made their first year in high school memorable. When Rochelle left, students wrote more easily. Some. Some were afraid of the stories because as Rance said, "It takes heart to tell the truth about your life."

But eventually they write. They write stories. They write poems. They write letters. They write essays. They learn how to switch in and out of the language of the powerful, as Rochelle does so effortlessly in her "Tired of Chicken" piece.

And after we write, we listen to each other's stories in our read-around circle where everyone has the opportunity to share, to be heard, to learn that knowledge can be gained by examining our lives. (See Shor 1987, Shor and Freire 1987.) In the circle, we discover that many young women encounter sexual harassment, we learn that store clerks follow black students, especially males, more frequently than they follow white students, we find that many parents drink or use drugs, we learn that many students are kept awake by the crack houses in their neighborhoods.

They feel that if they were smarter, prettier, stronger, these things wouldn't have happened to them.

Before we share, students often understand these incidents individually. They feel there's something wrong with them. If they were smarter, prettier, stronger, these things wouldn't have happened to them. When they hear other students' stories, they begin to realize that many of their problems aren't caused by a character defect. For example, a young man shared a passionate story about life with his mother who is a lesbian. He loved her but felt embarrassed to bring his friends home. He was afraid his peers would think he was gay or reject him if they knew about his mother. After he read, the class was silent. Some students cried. One young woman told him that her father was gay, and she had experienced similar difficulties but hadn't had the courage to tell people about it. She thanked him. Another student confided



that his uncle had died from AIDS the year before. What had been a secret shame became an opportunity for students to discuss sexual diversity more openly. Students who were rigidly opposed to the idea of homosexuality gained insights into their own homophobia—especially when presented with the personal revelations from their classmates. Those with homosexual relatives found new allies with whom they could continue their discussion and find support.

Sharing also provides a "collective text" for us to examine the social roots of problems more closely: Where do men/women develop the ideas that women are sexual objects? Where do they learn that it's okay for men to follow women or make suggestive remarks? Where is it written that it's the woman's fault if a man leers at her? How did these roles develop? Who gains from them? Who loses? How could we make it different? Our lives become a window to examine society.

But the lessons can't stop there. Fred can write better now. He and his classmates can feel comfortable and safe sharing their lives or discussing literature and the world. They can even understand that they need to ask "Who benefits?" to get a better perspective on a problem. But still, when they leave my class or this school, some people will judge them by how their subjects and verbs line up.

So I teach Fred the rules. It's the language of power in this country, and I would be cheating

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him if I pretended otherwise (Delpit 1988). I teach him this more effectively than Mrs. Delaney taught me because I don't humiliate him or put down his language. I'm also more effective because I don't rely on textbook drills; I use the text of Fred's writing. But I also teach Fred what Mrs. Delaney left out.

I teach Fred that language, like tracking, functions as part of a gatekeeping system in our country. Who gets managerial jobs, who works at banks and who works at fast-food restaurants, who gets into what college and who gets into college at all are decisions linked to ability to use Standard English. So how do we teach kids to write with honesty and passion about their world and get them to study the rules of the cash language? We go back to our study of society. We ask: Who made the rules that govern how we speak and write? Did Ninh's family and Fred's family and LaShonda's family all sit down together and decide on these

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rules? Who already talks like this and writes like this? Who has to learn how to change the way they talk and write? Why?

We make up our own tests that speakers of Standard English would find difficult. We read articles, stories, poems written in Standard English and those written in home language. We listen to videotapes of people speaking. Most kids like the sound of their home language better. They like the energy, the poetry, and the rhythm of the lan-

guage. We determine when and why people shift. We talk about why it might be necessary to learn Standard English.

Asking my students to memorize the rules without asking *who* makes the rules, *who* enforces the rules, *who* benefits from the rules, *who* loses from the rules, *who* uses the rules to keep some in and keep others out legitimates a social system that devalues my students' knowledge and language. Teaching the rules without reflection also underscores that it's okay for others—"authorities"—to dictate something as fundamental and as personal as the way they speak. Further, the study of Standard English without critique encourages students to believe that if they fail, it is because they are not smart enough or didn't work hard enough. They learn to blame themselves. If they get poor SAT scores, low grades on term papers or essays because of language errors, fail teacher entrance exams, they will internalize the blame; they will believe they did not succeed because they are inferior instead of questioning the standard of measurement and those making the standards.

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We must teach our students how to match subjects and verbs, how to pronounce *lawyer*, because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, they have to use the language of the powerful to be heard. But, in addition, we need to equip them to question an educational system that devalues their lives and their knowledge. If we don't, we condition them to a pedagogy of consumption where they will consume knowledge, priorities, and products that have been decided and manufactured without them in mind.

It took me years to undo what Mrs. Delaney did to me. Years to discover that *what* I said was more important than *how* I said it. Years to understand that my words, my family's words weren't wrong, weren't bad—they were just the words of the working class. For too long, I felt inferior when I spoke. I knew the voice of my childhood crept out, and I confused that with ignorance. It wasn't. I just didn't belong to the group who made the rules. I was an outsider, a foreigner in their world. My students won't be.

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