

**Code-Switching: Critical Thinking Strategies
for Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms**

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It was September and Joni was concerned. Her 2nd grade student Tamisha could neither read nor write; she was already a grade behind. What had happened? Joni sought out Melinda, Tamisha's first grade teacher. The answer dropped her in her tracks. "Tamisha? "Why you can't do *anything* with that child," Melinda sighed. Joni pursued, "What makes you think that?" Melinda, with some impatience shook her head, "Haven't you heard how she talks??!!!" Joni pushed further: "What *did* you do with Tamisha?" Melinda was categorical. "Tamisha? Oh, I put her in the corner with a coloring book." One beat. Two beats. Three beats passed as Joni processed the implications. Incredulous, Joni asked, "All year?" "Yes," the teacher replied. "The corner. With a coloring book. All year."

While extreme, Melinda's appraisal of Tamisha's performance and her potential as a learner is not isolated. In nationally established tests of child language acquisition, teachers routinely under-assess the language knowledge and reading performance of African American children. A typical task of K-2 reading readiness asks the child to read five sentences (*The mouse runs. The cat runs. The dog runs. The man runs. Run, mouse, run!*). As Jamal reads *Da mouse run. Da cat run. Da dog run. Da man run. Run, mouse, Run*, his teacher notes 8/15 errors, placing him far below the frustration level of 3/15. She assesses Jamal as a deeply struggling reader, and puts him in a low, low reading group or perhaps refers him to special education for developmental delay.

Through a traditional language arts lens, Melinda saw “broken English,” a broken child, and tried to shut future’s door. Through the same lens, Jamaal’s teacher heard mistakes in Standard English and diagnosed reading failure. From persistent over-representation in special education and remedial basic skills classes, and under-representation in honors classes, from lagging SAT scores and low high school graduation rates, on every measure of academic achievement (Ogbu, 2003), African American students perform far below their White peers. Across the US, teacher education and professional development programs fail to equip teachers to respond adequately to the needs of the African American student learner.

The framework: Insights and strategies

From culturally relevant pedagogy, we know that today’s world “demands a new way of looking at teaching that is grounded in an understanding of the role of culture and language in learning” (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 29). To succeed in teaching any student, the teacher must be able to a) accurately assess students’ performance, and b) build upon students’ existing knowledge. This is particularly true as teachers work with students from dialectally diverse backgrounds to scaffold new knowledge, Standard English. Yet, teachers lack the linguistic training and classroom strategies required to build upon the language skills children bring to school. Wheeler and Swords’ program for teaching Standard English in urban classrooms fills this gap. One linguistic insight and three strategies can serve as a framework for teacher education and professional development programs seeking to respond to the grammar needs of African American students throughout the US (Wheeler & Swords, 2006).

One linguistic insight

When African American students write *I have two sister and two brother, My Dad jeep is out of gas, or My mom deserve a good man*, teachers traditionally diagnose “poor English,” finding that the students are “having problems,” or making “errors” with plurality, possession, or verb agreement. In response, the teacher “corrects” the child’s writing, showing them the “right” way to convey these grammatical points. Yet, scholarship has amply demonstrated strong connections between teachers’ negative attitudes about stigmatized dialects, lower teacher expectations for students who speak them, and lower academic achievement on the part of students (Nieto, 2000). Furthermore, traditional correction methods fail to teach African American students the Standard English skills our society demands (Adger et. al., 2007).

Insights and strategies from linguistics offer a way out of this dark labyrinth (Godley et. al, 2006; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). When traditional approaches assess student language as “error-filled,” they misdiagnose student writing performance. Linguistics reveals that students using vernacular language (*My goldfish name is Scaley*, etc.) are not making errors in Standard English, but instead, are writing correctly in the patterns of the community language variety (Adger et. al., 2007; Green, 2002; Sweetland, 2006). With this insight, teachers can transform classroom practice and student learning in dialectally diverse schools.

Three strategies

Equipped with the insight that students are following grammar patterns of the community language variety, a teacher leads her students in critical thinking to foster discovery learning of Standard English grammar.

Scientific Method

As the teacher grades a set of papers, she will likely notice the same “error” cropping up repeatedly in her students’ writing. My work with K-14 public schools over the past decade has revealed over 30 Everyday English grammar patterns transferring into student writing. Among these, a consistent top ten patterns emerge (i.e., subject-verb agreement, *Mama walk the dog every day*; showing past time, *Mama walk the dog yesterday*; past time (2), *I seen the movie*; possessive, *My sister boyfriend came over*; showing plurality, *It take 24 hour to rotate*; and *a* vs. *an*, *a elephant*, *an rapper*. The linguistically-informed teacher understands these represent grammar patterns from the community dialect transferring into student writing, not errors in Standard English. A linguistically-informed teacher sees such examples as data (Wheeler, 2005).

To begin, the teacher will assemble a set of sentences, all drawn from student writing, all showing the same grammar pattern, and build a code-switching chart, our core graphic organizer (Figure 1).

Possessive Patterns	
Informal English	Formal English
<u>Taylor cat</u> is black.	<u>Taylor's cat</u> is black.
The <u>boy coat</u> is torn.	The <u>boy's coat</u> is torn.
A <u>giraffe neck</u> is long.	A <u>giraffe's neck</u> is long.
Did you see the <u>teacher pen</u> ?	Did you see the <u>teacher's pen</u> ?
<u>The Patterns</u>	<u>The Patterns</u>
owner + what is owned	owner + 's + what is owned
noun + noun	noun + 's + noun

Figure 1. Code-switching chart for possessive patterns

She provides the Standard English equivalent in the right hand column. The teacher then leads students in the scientific method:

- **Examine sentences.** She starts by reading the informal sentences aloud.
- **Seek pattern:** Then the teacher leads the students to seek the grammar pattern these sentences follow. She might say, "*Taylor cat is black.* Let's see how this sentence shows ownership. Who does the cat belong to?" Once students answer that the cat belongs to Taylor, the teacher will then ask "How do you know?" Students will most likely answer that it says *Taylor cat*. Or that the word *Taylor* sits next to the word *cat*.
- **Define pattern:** Now the teacher turns to helping students define the pattern by repeating their response, putting it in context. "Oh, *Taylor* is next to *cat*. So, you're saying that the owner, *Taylor*, is right next to what is owned, *cat*. Maybe this is the pattern for informal possessives – [owner + what is owned]?" Students have thus formulated a hypothesis for how Informal English shows possession.
- **Test pattern:** True to the scientific method, next, she will test the hypothesis. After the teacher reads the next sentence aloud, she will have the students determine if the pattern holds true. So, after reading *The boy coat is torn*, the teacher might ask, "Who is the owner?" The students will respond that *the boy* is the owner. The teacher will probe further, "What does he own?" The students will say that he owns *the coat*. The teacher will then summarize student discovery: "So *the boy* is the owner and *the coat* is what he owns. That follows our pattern of [owner + what is owned]." It will be important to test each sentence in this manner.

- **Write informal English pattern:** Finally, the teacher will write the pattern, *owner + what is owned*, under the last informal sentence (Wheeler & Swords, 2006; under review).

Comparison and Contrast

Next, the teacher applies the #1 most effective teaching strategy, comparison and contrast (Marzano, et al., 2001) to discovery learning of grammar. Building upon existing knowledge, she leads students to contrast the grammatical patterns of Everyday English to the grammatical patterns of Formal/Standard English, and so make the language contrasts explicit and conscious to the child. The teacher leads students to explore “what changed” between the Informal English sentence (*Taylor cat is black*, etc.) and the Formal English sentence (*Taylor’s cat is black*, etc.). Through detailed comparison and contrast, students discover that Formal English has an apostrophe –s. In particular, the pattern for Formal English possessive is [*owner + ’s + what is owned*]. This linguistic technique is called contrastive analysis.

Code-switching as meta-cognition

Having used the scientific method and comparison and contrast to identify the grammar patterns of Informal and Formal English, the teacher then leads children in putting their knowledge to work through metacognition. Metacognition is knowledge about one’s own knowledge and thinking processes, especially knowledge of strategies and the situations in which strategies might be used to boost performance (Flavell, 1979). Children who are aware of their own thinking processes, especially the strategies they might use for successful

reading or writing, perform significantly better on these tasks (Block & Pressley, 2001; Israel, Block, Kinnucan-Welsch & Bauserman, 2005). In the case of learning about the differences between Formal and Informal English, children must learn to actively code-switch – to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience and communicative purpose) and to intentionally choose the style of language appropriate to that setting. When Swords asks, “So, in your school writing, which one of these patterns do you think you need to use? [Owner + what is owned]? or [owner + ‘s + what is owned]?” students readily learn to choose the formal pattern (Figure 2).

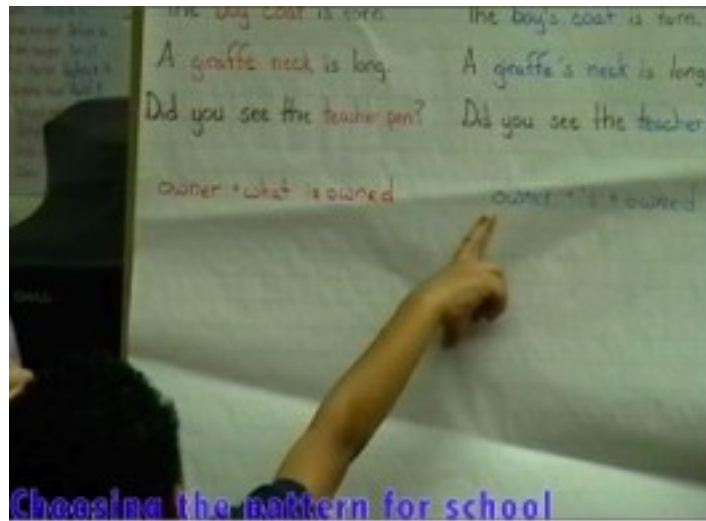


Figure 2: Code-switching, a metacognitive strategy for choosing language to fit the setting.

Code-switching also requires cognitive flexibility, the ability to think about a task or situation in multiple ways, as it requires that children think about their own language in both formal and informal forms. Such cognitive flexibility plays a significant role in successful literacy

learning and teaching (Cartwright, in press). Teaching children to consciously reflect on their linguistic varieties and to choose the appropriate language variety for a particular situation provides them with metacognitive strategies and the cognitive flexibility to apply those strategies in daily practice. With friends and family in the community, the child will choose the language characteristic of the community, often Informal English. In school, on NCLB tests, in analytic essays and beyond school, in the world of work, the child learns to choose the expected Formal, Standard English. In this way, we add another linguistic code, Standard English, to the child's linguistic toolbox.

Code-switching, a successful literacy tool

Research and test results have demonstrated these techniques highly successful, both in fostering Standard English mastery among African American students (grades 2 – 14) and in boosting overall student writing performance (Fogel & Ehri, 2002; Sweetland, 2006; Taylor, 1991). Under traditional correctionist techniques, my collaborator, Rachel Swords saw the usual 30-point gap in performance between her African American and White 3rd grade students. In 2002, her first year of implementing contrastive analysis and code-switching, Swords closed the achievement gap in her classroom; Black students equal Whites in English and History and outperformed White students in Math and Science. These results have held constant on each subsequent NCLB test. In 2006, in a class that began below grade level, 100% of Swords' African American students passed 100% of Virginia's year-end NCLB tests.

Reaching out to urban America

Fortunately, Lori knew Tamisha was not making mistakes in Standard English; the child *did* know grammar – the grammar of the community language variety. Now the task

was to build on existing knowledge to leverage new knowledge, Standard English. And so, when Lori tutored Tamisha after school, she leap-frogged in reading and writing. Despite having started a full year behind, by June, Tamisha was reading and writing on grade level. How? Why? Her teacher possessed the insights and strategies to foster Standard English mastery among urban students. Perhaps even more importantly, Lori knew her student did not suffer language deficit. She was able to see Tamisha for the child she was and is -- a bright, capacious youngster.

Lori has laid down the red pen for the far more effective skills of critical thinking -- contrastive analysis and code-switching. We have the tools to positively transform the teaching and learning of grammar and writing in dialectally diverse classrooms. Let us finally reach out to the students of urban America. Isn't it long past time?

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