

# **Understanding the Way Students Speak: A Guide for Educators on Creating Culturally Responsive Environments for Linguistically Diverse Students**

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## **Abstract**

Dialectal diversity is an area of student diversity that is often overlooked in terms of how educators view students who speak nonstandard forms of English. Moreover, public school educators must explore the issue of dialectal diversity among students and how they are perceived based on their language variation. More importantly, educators must examine their perceptions about those who speak non Standard English and how their perceptions translate into classroom practices. This is a theoretical article that explores students' language variations and its impact on their educational opportunities. More importantly, it examines the notion of teacher perceptions of students who speak nonstandard variations of Standard English and their classroom practices. The article explores the relationship between dialectal diversity and student achievements as well as the role of educators have in creating culturally responsive educational environments to maximize students' potential. The article also provides guidelines for educators on how to create an optimum learning environment for students.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive practices, dialects, language variation, teaching style

## **Introduction**

People who share important cultural, social, and regional characteristics typically speak more alike than those persons who differ in such characteristics. These language varieties can be classified as dialects. Dialects are varieties of language that are closely associated with geographical and social classes. The term dialect is widely used when referring to vernacular language varieties (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999).

Dialect varieties are described as nonstandard uses of language in relation to standard English. Dialects differ from one another in terms of how words are composed and combined in sentences as well as in language systems, such as grammatical patterns of a particular dialect. Moreover, dialects extend beyond the prevailing notion of words, phrases, and pronunciations to how group members structure and use a particular dialect form in social interactions.

Dialects also vary across social boundaries. Conversely, social variations of language are generally classified into two groups: standard and nonstandard forms of language.

Language is not uniform and varies according to a person's cultural background, geographical location, social class, gender, or age. Language markers can be referred to as sociocultural characteristics. Continuing this paradigm, language variations may refer to the manner in which language is used at home, among friends in the community, and at school. Most importantly, language variations are a natural process of speaking a particular language. That is, a person cannot speak a language without speaking a dialect of that language. According to Dandy (1991) there are even dialect variations within American Sign Language.

Linguistic skills are a strong indicator of the likelihood of student academic success within the educational arena. The closer a person's dialect is to the dominant version of standard American English, the easier it is to learn to read (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). There is a correlation between dialectal diversity and reading failure (Wolfram et al., 1999). Moreover, it is important to understand how dialectal diversity affects the process of academic achievement; specifically, learning how to read.

### **The Language of Educational Opportunity**

The growing population of language-diverse students in public schools demands that schools meet the needs of linguistically diverse groups within the educational arena (Boateng, 1990; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999; Wolfram et al., 1999). To understand and master language in a society gives one power over persons who have not grasped the "accepted" standard linguistic style of the dominant culture. Consequently, these nonstandard speakers are relegated to a particular status within their society. However, those persons who have mastered the socially-sanctioned and endorsed language are likely to have more opportunities, and consequently better life choices. As such, these persons typically have access to higher education and professional jobs. Therefore, one can surmise that students who speak closely to that of the dominant culture will be more successful than those who speak with a nonstandard language variation.

The Children's Defense Fund's State of American Children (2011) reported that "every fifth child in America is poor" (p. B-12). Knapp and Shields (1992) reported that over one in five children are living in poverty in the United States. The authors argued that urgent concern is increasing among educators, policy makers, and researchers regarding the quality of education for poor and minority students. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2011), the alarming rate that poor children leave school ill prepared is distressing. As a result, Knapp and Shields (1992) argued, "these children find themselves at a disadvantage in the pursuit of learning" (p. 1).

Theoretically, the purpose of schools is to build future adults who will be able to be successful in society in terms of supporting themselves and their families. However, for many poor and minority students who speak nonstandard varieties of Standard English, this has become an elusive goal. This is because schools have historically protected rather than challenged the

status quo. In short, the environments in which schools operate do not encourage cultural and cognitive enrichment as it relates to teaching and learning. Children who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds suffer the most because often they lack the linguistic experiences and mechanisms needed for academic achievement.

Dialects are a natural and normal aspect of language which has not been formally acknowledged within the structure of public schools. Dialectal differences can affect the quality of education received by students. Labov (1972), a noted sociolinguist, reported that poor African-American students' language dialect is significantly different from the standard culture of the classroom. The position held by most linguists is that the problem is not the dialect of poor and minority students, but the relationship between language use and what occurs in the classroom.

The increased focus about dialects can significantly reduce misconceptions about vernacular speakers. Demo (2000) explains that speaking a vernacular dialect is not incorrect, nor does it represent language deficiencies. He posits that the "correctness of language" is a matter of social acceptability. Dialect discrimination is widely tolerated in the United States. However, the teaching about dialects may mean questioning widely-held views about language. It can be argued that educators who have a better understanding of dialectal diversity are less likely to make pejorative judgments about vernacular speakers.

Moreover, educators must understand that language is linked to social mobility. Language shapes and molds the future. We are dependent upon it for our daily communication and interaction with others. It is not just a tool used to communicate simple commands, but a vehicle of expression of love, hurt, and other emotions. For children, the experience of language is more profound. Freire (1999) dissected the phenomenon of language. He stated, "The essence of dialogue is the word" (p. 68). However, the word is more than just an instrument that makes dialogue possible. According to Freire (1999), "To speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 68). Therefore, in order to change the lives of children, educators must be knowledgeable about students' language variations and its potential impact on their educational opportunities.

### **Dialects: A Socio-Political Point of View**

Past studies of dialects among group members have generally pointed toward the construct that regional dialects tend to be more distinguishable by pronunciations and vocabulary. However, social dialects are more distinguishable by grammatical usage as well as the aforementioned language markers.

In every society, there are the "haves" and the "have-nots." Those persons in society who are considered to have social power or high status make judgments about language use, which in turn influences other members of the society. For example, teachers and school leaders tend to be influenced by these individuals and their views on language. Wolfram et al. (1999) report,

“these individuals have great influence in deciding who is hired and who will get what placement in schools” (p. 16).

Dialects associated with social status and ethnic identity play a significant role in American society. Dialects that are stratified based on social status and ethnic identity are judged more critically by members of society. Wolfram and Schillings-Estes (1998) report that dialects that vary among ethnic and social lines are judged on intellectual capabilities, intelligence, and employability, as well as personality attributes. In addition, these members of society are stigmatized and are disadvantaged because of their less favored dialects. Wolfram et al. (1999) reported that these members are generally viewed as deficient in certain areas by group members who are considered to have more power and authority regarding our society’s institutions, educational systems, and government. They reported that the group members, who have power and authority in society, generally believe that disenfranchised groups must conform to the dominant culture’s perception of socially-acceptable language and behavior in order to be accepted. Unfortunately, for disenfranchised group members, success in schools for them may depend on their ability to adapt their language to school norms. Wolfram et al. (1999) argues that if disenfranchised group members are unable to adapt their language to that of the dominant group, they might be at risk for school failure.

There are two major constructs regarding disenfranchised group dialects that differ culturally and linguistically from mainstream society. They have been referred to as the deficient and difference position. Language supporters of the deficient position believe that speakers of nonstandard dialect are socially and cognitively handicapped. Proponents of this theory believe that nonstandard dialects are illogical, lack coherency, and viewed as poor English. However, supporters of the difference position view speakers of nonstandard dialect in terms of differences among their language systems (Wolfram et al., 1999).

Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, Hall, and Gollnick (1999) report that standard English is the dialect that is used by the majority of the dominant population for official and formal communication. However, there are numerous dialects spoken across the country, region, and class (socioeconomic status). Thus, every dialect has its own set of grammatical rules that are known to the user. As such, many Americans are bi-dialectal and multi-dialectal. This means that they speak more than one language variety. In essence, persons who are bi-dialectal or multi-dialectal use standard English in one setting, but use their native or local dialect at home, as well as when talking among friends. Society and cultural perceptions determine which dialects are appropriate or inappropriate in specific settings.

Townsend and Harper (1997) find that “most people do judge others by the way they speak and write” (p. 2). The authors contend that success in schools reflects students’ abilities to communicate effectively in contextual ways. Villegas (1988) supports this notion. She states that an explanation of minority students’ failure in academic achievement stems largely from the disjointedness between home and school. Villegas reports that the lack of academic achievement of minority students could be theorized through the home-school incompatibility theory. In the words of Villegas, “this theory attributes the academic problems of minority

students to cultural disjuncture's between home and school" (p. 1). She further contends that educators need more in-depth knowledge about the language students' use at home and the language they use in the school settings. Villegas argues that "teachers and minority students often misinterpret each other due to different assumptions about the appropriate ways of using language in the classroom" (p. 1). Moreover, more in-depth knowledge about students' home and school language use would allow educators the opportunity to develop culturally responsive practices for teaching students from dialectally-diverse backgrounds.

The English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools (Virginia Department of Education, 1995) reports, "student's home and cultural languages are a starting point for all language learning" (p. 2). Townsend and Harper (1997) states that teachers who do not receive the necessary dialectal discourse would continue to perpetuate the hegemonic system in place that continues to discriminate and denigrate against vernacular speakers. Thus, it is critical for educators to create not only a physically safe environment for students, but a conceptually safe environment as well. In addition, educators must understand the critical connection between student learning and their dialects. Therefore, educators must provide professional development for teachers in order to enhance their awareness of these two interrelated and interconnected variables.

Raising the language consciousness of educational professionals is a critical point in closing the achievement gap among students. Language is an identifiable characteristic that is used in schools by teachers as a medium to judge students' intelligence, ability, and character. Oftentimes, these judgments of students are pejorative in nature based upon stereotypes of language-diverse minority students. In addition, it is important to note that teachers view minority students who speak standard English as middle class and as having a higher academic ability (Irvine, 1990). However, poor and minority students whose dialect is closely related to nonstandard dialect are considered in a less favorable light. As a result, teachers' negative views about nonstandard language variations are manifested in the form of hostility toward these students (Irvine, 1990).

When teachers and students come from diverse backgrounds, they bring with them different expectations regarding the use of language. As a result, these differences can create a disconnection between students and teacher. In addition, the lack of interaction between teachers and students fosters cultural dissonance in the classroom. Thus, teachers' understanding of student culture and language is limited, which often leads to misinterpretations of students' cognitive abilities. As such, teachers may interpret students' lack of interest in the classroom to be due to cultural differences, rather than others reason that may affect classroom performance (Wolfram et al., 1999). Hiebert (1991) reports that non-mainstream students are at risk of poor treatment in a society that is only beginning to adapt to their needs. Further, he contends that a strong relationship exists between certain characteristics of these students and indicators of school failure; specifically, dialectal diversity.

## **Teacher Perceptions of Students' Dialectal Diversity and Classroom Practices**

Linguists posit that schools have rituals and routines. These rituals and routines may include, but are not limited to, interaction patterns between students and teachers, as well as language use within the classroom. The rules that govern these rituals and routines are explicit, specifically regarding language use. Consequently, the classroom and class practices create an environment of uncertainty for language minority students (Wolfram et al., 1999; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

Classroom practices exert a profound effect on students' language and literacy skills (Wilkerson & Silliman, 2000; Wolfram et al., 1999). Research indicates that there is a strong correlation between language and academic success. Teachers' biases toward dialectal diversity impede the development of effective language instruction in the classroom. Therefore, the failure of teachers to recognize dialectal diversity creates an environment that academically hinders non-mainstream students (Boateng, 2000; Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Wolfram et al., 1999).

Public school teachers face many challenges regarding language diversity issues within the classroom. Therefore, teachers' knowledge of dialects and language variations become a significant construct to consider in terms of classroom practices. In order to explore this issue, Townsend and Harper (1997) surveyed 152 preservice teachers about their knowledge of language variations. The study found that two-thirds of the teachers revealed misconceptions about dialects and the abilities of students who spoke nonstandard English. They concluded that teachers and students would benefit greatly from an explicit language study.

Research indicates that interactions between students who speak nonstandard English and their teachers are often limited. Typically, interactions between dialectally diverse students and their teachers consist of teachers doing most of the talking in the classroom. Thus, students' production of oral language is limited. In addition, when students are allowed to respond, they provide simplistic information and recall statements (Slavin, 2000). This type of pattern of teacher-student interaction negates the opportunity for students to engage in linguistic play and more complicated aspects of learning.

Gonzales, Vegas, and Yaukey (1997) state that research on classroom instruction indicates that nonmainstream students are often believed to be incapable of academic success. They note that the dialect of the child might interfere with the acquisition of information and educational skills. Christian (1997) reports that dialectal differences can affect the quality of education received by students. Gonzales et al. (1997) report that as a result, nonmainstream students have had classroom experiences that are much different from those of their mainstream counterparts. For nonmainstream, low performing ability students, the typical classroom experience consists of worksheets and rote memorization of information. Gonzales et al. explain that teachers interact with these students only when they ask for help, and typically, their responses are usually directive, specific, and factual. In contrast, teachers of mainstream students engage their students in more challenging and engaging discussions. That is, teacher responses are usually non-directive and exchanges are thematic and strategic.



Effective teachers are knowledgeable about their students as well as the subject matter. More importantly, effective teachers know how to communicate their knowledge to students. Slavin (2000) explores the relationship between teaching and learning. He finds that effective teaching is more than the transmission of knowledge from one person to another, but incorporates the transmission of that knowledge by many strategies. This is essential in ensuring effective instruction in the classroom. Moreover, effective teachers know that by enabling students to make conceptual leaps and retain knowledge, students learn that the acquisition of knowledge is powerful and purposeful (Slavin, 2000).

It is important for educators to understand the construct of effective teaching and learning. Research supports the notion that poor and minority students often neither receive effective instruction nor have teachers who are culturally sensitive to their needs in terms of classroom learning (Anyon, 1980; Boateng, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Scholars within the educational community report that effective teaching and learning occur in collaborative learning environments.

Poor and minority students often have poor quality, as well as unqualified teachers in the classroom. These students should have the best quality and qualified teachers in the classroom (Viadero, 2000). Delpit (1997a) reports that quality teachers cultivate cultural sensitive practices when engaging poor minority in classroom pedagogy. She argues that culturally sensitive practices, when employed into the teaching paradigm, alleviate the apparent disconnection between poor and minority students and classroom practices.

Effective teachers should also employ the cultural affordance model into their method of classroom pedagogy. The cultural affordance model posits that teachers should focus on the knowledge and experience that students initially bring to school as a starting point for curriculum development and instruction. Shaw (1997) continues with this paradigm:

Too often schools do not legitimize the knowledge or experiences these [minority] children bring to school. Instead, schools are most likely to label these children as failures because their backgrounds—usually their language and culture—are seen as inadequate preparation for learning. (p. 1)

Further, effective instruction is critical in terms of developing language skills in students. According to Wilkerson and Silliman (2000), the basic form of teaching integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing as tools of inquiry and as a part of instruction.

Gonzales et al. (1997) states that the typical interaction trends with middle to upper class students are usually the adult as spectator, and the child as exhibitionist. This means that adults ask children questions with known responses. The adult and child both know and understand that the purpose of this exchange is for the child to demonstrate knowledge, thus leading to appreciation and rewards. In contrast, to the lower-class child at school, linguistic play is less positive in comparison with their counterparts. These students have fewer opportunities to develop their understandings and to explore their experiences.

As a result, there is a disconnection between poor and minority students and instructional practices in the classroom. These students are often blamed as the causation factor for their own academic failure in schools (Irvine, 1990; Vernon-Feagans, 1996; Wolfram et al., 1999). Ladson-Billings (1994) states that teachers should “provide intellectual challenges by teaching to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator” (p. 123). Unfortunately, for poor and minority students, this has not been the case in schools. Ladson-Billings states that in order to help raise the achievement of culturally driven students, teachers should do the following:

1. Employ culturally relevant teaching methods. The author reported that when students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence.
2. When teachers employ “scaffolding,” students are able to build upon their own knowledge, skills, and move toward more difficult skills and knowledge.
3. The focus of the classroom must be instructional. Teachers should adopt the notion that “real education” is about extending student’s thinking and abilities.
4. Effective teaching involves in depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter. (pp. 123–126)

Villegas (1988) reports that students and teachers might speak the same language; however, their interpretations of meanings and words are different as well as how they use language. Wilkerson and Silliman (2000) state that communicative patterns among students and teachers might cause difficulties because of different cultural backgrounds. As such, this causes much confusion and misunderstanding between teachers and students.

Villegas (1988) continues that students whose language closely matches the dialect in the classroom have an advantage in terms of learning opportunities and success. She contends that this is evident for white middle class students. By contrast, poor and minority students’ experiences with language in the classroom are much less positive in terms of opportunities for learning and success. This is largely due in part because most poor and minority students’ language is a hybrid of what is spoken at home and in schools. In addition, Goldenberg (1991) reports that the discussion method should be used more frequently by classroom teachers. He posits that when classroom discussions are educative, they also engage students in better productive social interactions.

### **Teacher Expectations and Students’ Language Variations**

As Fillmore and Snow (2000) state, educators must know how to “understand that student talk is the key to analysis of what students know, and how they understand” (p. 5). Research abounds on the relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement, teaching styles and student achievement, classroom environment, and student achievement (McNergney & Herbert, 2001; Vernon-Feagans, 1996; Wolfram et al., 1999). However, little attention has been directed at how students perceive their teachers’ expectations of them and



their classmates. More importantly, even less attention has focused on how students perceive their teachers' behavior toward them based on their dialect.

Boateng (1990) reports that the notion of success and failure in schools has been attributed to many factors. Cotton (2001) argues most educators posit those teachers' expectations, specifically the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, has the greatest impact regarding student success or failure in schools. As a result, numerous studies support the theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy in order to explain how teachers' expectations of students are operationalized in the classroom (Delpit, 1997b; Irvine, 1990). The self-fulfilling prophecy regarding teachers exerts that teachers' beliefs about students will self-actualize in the classroom.

Burnette (1999) states that there are many ways in which teachers can influence the success of culturally diverse students. She argues that personal and academic relationships between students and teachers are the most influential in determining the success of students. Burnette explains that this relationship has been termed the core relationship of learning. Many of these strategies can be employed by teachers in order to build strong core relationships with their students. Most germane to this discussion, the author states that teachers should consider students' cultural and language skills when developing learning objectives and instructional activities. Further, Burnett offers the following strategies:

1. Teachers should appreciate and accommodate similarities and differences among student's culture.
2. Teachers should build relationships with their students. This may be accomplished through understanding the lives of the students.
3. Teachers should focus on the way students learn and observe students to identify their task orientations.
4. Teachers should match their behavior to their setting.
5. Teachers should facilitate comparable learning opportunities for students with differing characteristics.
6. Teachers should communicate expectations.
7. Teachers should provide frequent feedback at multiple levels.
8. Teachers should provide rationales—explain the benefit of learning a specific task.
9. Teachers should require mastery from students (p. 5).

Wubbels, Levy, and Bekelmann (1997) report that teachers communicate their different levels of expectations of their students. They argue that teachers who have high expectations of their students are considered highly effective and strong classroom leaders. Further, teachers who have high expectations of their students are described as very helpful, friendly, and understanding of their students. Consequently, the higher expectations that teachers have for their students, the higher quality of instruction is received by their students.

## **Conclusion**

Poor and minority students are failing in public schools. School reform initiatives have made little to moderate impact on the collective success of these students. Many public school systems emphasize teaching style, teacher preparedness, and classroom management as the sole factors that have contributed to the poor academic achievement of minority students. However, the lack of acknowledgment regarding students' dialectal diversity suggests that educators of poor and minority students are lacking the necessary culturally responsive awareness, experience, and knowledge regarding effective pedagogy and discourse to positively impact the achievement of these students. If educators continuously lack the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to teach children from diverse backgrounds, then schools will continue to create a population of students who be ill prepared to face the challenges of tomorrow.

Educators with limited understanding about poor and minority students' dialects and how their dialects impact their educational opportunities will continue to create an unsteady school environment for the future of these students. It is the mission of public schools to provide an optimum environment for students to succeed. Without a culturally responsive environment, students will be ill-prepared for the challenges of the future. Further, students may resort to a life of crime and social isolation because of the limited opportunities they had during their school experiences. Vernon-Feagans (1996) supported the notion in which she states,

Failure of the educational system to serve these children has an enormous societal cost in lost potential for these children and great financial cost to society in the form of joblessness, criminality, and many of the other problems associated with poverty. (p. 14)

The rejection of students in the school system and therefore, limiting their potential does not mean that society will not have to deal with these individuals on a personal level. These students will not grow up to be invisible. Therefore, it is essential for educators to create, maintain, and sustain culturally responsive environments that support and respect the language variations of students to maximize their educational opportunities.

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