Teaching Critical Language Awareness to Combat Failure of Black Language in Education

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Teaching Critical Language Awareness to Combat Failure of Black Language in Education

Overview of Strategy, including Target Audience
Currently, most educational systems teach students there is a singular, “correct” way to write. Moralizing language regarding an arbitrary system of standardized English writing, a White Mainstream English (WME) connotes a failure for other languages to conform to a white standard. I teach at a small, open-enrollment, Historically Black University in the Midwest where most of my students explain their biggest fear is academic failure. The majority of my students self-identify as Black and are Pell Grant eligible. When I surveyed my students, they reported their biggest fear is failure, both in the class and in the university as a whole; 65% of non-Black students expressed a fear of failure and over 99% of Black students report this same concern.

Through incorporating Critical Language Awareness and teaching Black Language (BL), which has been labeled Ebonics or African-American vernacular English, as a social justice strategy, students critically consider the oppressive systems of US society, challenge the dominant linguistic social structures, and empower other linguistic norms and languages.

Rationale
Many people before me have outlined teaching strategies, life strategies, and more for addressing linguistic bias and inequality. In thinking of citation as an act of love, I must recognize the following activists/teachers/scholars who began helping me to decolonize my mind and have helped me in my work toward a socially just future: April Baker-Bell, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Asoa Inoue, Lamar L. Johnson, Bettina Love, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Geneva Smitherman, Victor Villanueva, Vershawn Ashanti Young. I recommend their scholarly works as a starting point for linguistic justice in education. In order to stress the need for change, Baker-Bell (2020) tackles the criticism that teaching WME benefits Black learners:

If y’all actually believe that using “standard English” will dismantle white supremacy, then you are not paying attention! If we, as teachers, truly believe that code-switching will dismantle white supremacy, we have a problem. If we honestly believe that code-switching will save Black people’s lives, then we really ain’t paying attention to what’s happening in the world. Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer while saying “I cannot breathe.” Wouldn’t you consider “I cannot breathe” standard English? (p. 5)

Linguistic justice needs to be a major part in social justice movements; ignoring the impact of linguistic justice only stymies social justice movements and punishes marginalized students. Critical Language Awareness (CLA) provides one path forward to creating equity, accessibility, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Alim (2005) argues the goal of CLA approaches is for “students [to] become conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live” (emphasis mine, p. 28). CLA has a focus on transformation and change, which lends itself to social justice. Teaching students the language they live with and to critically analyze and think about cultural language is nothing new, but incorporating BL and recognizing multiple Englishes is one approach (Turner Ledgerwood, 2022).

Briefly, CLA is part of critical language pedagogy; it is focused on linguistics and language, with an emphasis on power relations within cultural-linguistic norms. CLA requires
analysis of the relationship between language and power, with language as a starting point for talking about social and cultural issues. The goal of this approach is to empower students as readers and writers, while encouraging them to critique academic language (Alim, 2005; Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 1999; Shapiro, 2022). Shapiro (2022) explains that CLA involves a combination of self-reflection (experiences, attitudes, and behaviors), social justice (privilege, prejudice, and discrimination), and rhetorical agency (critical reading, writing as connected with communities, and informed decision-making). Ultimately, CLA calls for understanding and critiquing how language and power are interconnected.

CLA gives us a path to help students and our communities by teaching about social justice and power in relation to language systems. Disciplinary organizations in English and writing studies have been discussing students and their language rights since the 1970s. “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice! PeriodT!” (2020), is the most recent disciplinary white paper:

We DEMAND that:
1. teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!
2. teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!
3. political discussions and praxis center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!
4. teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!
5. Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language!

Using this as a framework for thinking of social justice in education, I say that we can begin to take simple steps, outlined by CLA pedagogies to improve upon linguistic justice for Black students and move toward a future of Black linguistic justice. As educators, we must:

1. Change our language for discussing standardized English
2. Question and critique “standard English” and its relationship to power
3. Learn and teach the history of BL
4. Discuss linguistic prejudice and the detrimental effects of code-switching
5. Discuss who and what publications code mesh
6. Read texts written in BL
7. Give room in grading/judging of writing for authors to use their own English(es)
8. Actively confront the idea of failure in writing & talk about who judges this
9. Discuss productive failure
10. Discuss key barriers to learning, grit & procrastination

We must reframe the moralizing language that has historically surrounded WME, so that we do not imply other English(es) are less than. We can no longer call it correct (incorrect), proper (improper), educated (uneducated), etc. Additionally, we need to bring discussions of language and “standard English" to the forefront in order to question and critique the systems of oppression. If we do not know the history of BL as a way to subvert the power of slavery and
linguistic planning and isolation that created it, then we must learn about this rich history (Smitherman, 2006; Smitherman, 1990). Then, we must teach others, especially our students. We need to openly discuss linguistic prejudice and the detrimental effects of code-switching (Alim & Smitherman 2012; Baker-Bell, 2017; Baugh, 2015; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Johnson, 2022; Sealy-Ruiz, 2016; Smitherman, 1997). We need to openly discuss who code meshes in their scholarly academic writing, and what publications allow for linguistic diversity in their publications.

In working with both students and other teachers, I have found that Vershaun Ashanti Young’s “Should writers use they own English” (2010) is an effective reading to begin discussions. We need to read and assign texts that are written in BL. We also need to restructure our grading/judging and heuristics in order to leave room for authors to use their own languages. Personally, I have moved to a labor-based grading model in my writing classes, with some elements of ungrading incorporated. I adapted my model from the works of Inoue (2022, 2023) in concert with other educators. But other options include specifications grading (Specs grading) (Nilson, 2016), learning contracts (“Self-Directed,” 2023), and ungrading (Bloom, 2020; Stommel, 2018). Since I changed the scope of grading, my students engage with Alfie Kahn’s work on how grades can be harmful, and I add lessons on BL in order to explain why I have radically adjusted my grading and teaching to create more equity in my classrooms. We also need to work to revise our language of assessment to recognize linguistic diversity and in order to create equity (Gere et al, 2021).

Because we live in an unjust system, we also need to address aspects to confront social-emotional learning (SEL) and the damage unjust educational systems have perpetrated. Too long has WME taken a forefront in our learning environments, inflicting damage on anyone who does not identify within the male, cis, hetero, white, able-bodied dominant norm. Because of this we need to confront the idea of failure, of who has judged our writing, and the negative talk we may have internalized surrounding language. We also need to discuss productive failure openly (look at this special issue). I often use Allison Carr’s essay “Failure is not an option” when I teach this or provide faculty development. As I have argued elsewhere, we need to change our programs in order to combat a fear of failure (Turner Ledgerwood, 2021). We also have to confront key barriers to learning, including grit and procrastination, in order to uncover the hidden curriculum that is so often missing for our underserved students. For more resources and materials to incorporate, please consult https://bit.ly/OSCLG2023.

We also must strive to increase the readings that are available by rethinking how we conduct peer reviews and how we edit scholarly works as journal or book series editors. We must rethink our practices in these spaces as well. The journal Composition Studies provides an example of a journal making changes to become anti-racist in our reviewing practices, based upon the “Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors” to help guide and reframe how we write, review, and publish.

Analysis of Effectiveness
I know this sounds like a lot to do, especially for anyone who is new to the struggle of creating equity through social linguistic justice. Hopefully, these references assist in justifying changes to our pedagogy. I recommend starting small and working toward the greater good by changing things one step at a time, by opening ourselves to learning more and making more changes. I am constantly looking to make more changes to my pedagogy, but thus far students have often come back and thanked me for the work I’ve done. It never fails that when I teach my classes about the history of BL my students either express how glad they are to have learned it or ask me why no
one else has ever taught it. I really hope that fewer and fewer students have that reaction in the future because it would mean more teachers have incorporated it into their classrooms. I also acknowledge that I have focused on BL, and that is because of my students who have taught me so much about their lives and who make me want to become a better educator and work for the equity, accessibility, and belonging that they deserve. I believe CLA gives us a path forward to turn practices toward linguistic diversity and social justice across varieties of English. And I look forward to that future.

**References**


Inoue, A. B. (2019). 2019 CCC Chair’s address: How do we language so people stop killing each other, or what do we do about white language supremacy? *College Composition and Communication, 71*(2), 352–369.


