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Black English and Culture Meet the Mainstream Classroom

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Abstract

Learning English can often be a critical factor in people's lives, and the choice to disengage from learning out of sheer frustration can have devastating psychological and social effects for people who need to acquire English in order to be able to fulfill academic, personal and professional goals. While I was not able to find statistics on a global level, it is easy to believe that English language learners do disengage frequently. This is most obvious in the United States where the Standard English (SE) model of teaching black children has resulted in a high level of disengagement with learning and a nationally disproportionate low level of academic success among people in black communities where there is a difference between the dialect of their spoken language and the SE dialect they encounter in school. In this paper, I attempt to show how the development of the black English (BE) language, and the issue of black literacy in America, reflects how culture and language are forged by "real life" experience. Learning a second language is similarly a "real life" experience. An awareness of this dynamic should be used to inform language teaching methods, if we are to make best use of learner's time, money and effort, in learning a second language. By focusing on the development of BE, and the subsequent literacy issues, I hope to illuminate how language teaching methods and practices benefit from using a learner's culture and language.

INTRODUCTION

Standard English (SE) has grown in status as the language of international business and politics. Knowing SE has prestige and power –it is a language of currency. Learning SE is desired around the globe and many people are motivated and willingly spend money, time and effort to acquire it. But what happens when there is not such a clear distinction in the language needs, as in the case of dialects? For students raised in communities where a close variety of SE is the norm, they have an unfair advantage over classmates who speak a dialect that is significantly different from the SE-based curriculum used in school. This is the situation for black children who come to school with a different English dialect.

Schools are good indicators of language use and societal views, and for many Black students their dialect is, either consciously or unconsciously, viewed as wrong, lazy, or corrupt. There is a perception that black children are broken and need to be "fixed" and remediated. On the other hand, when their dialect is viewed as a valuable asset to a unique American heritage and identity, there are many reasons why black children should grow up knowing both a dialect and a standard form, valuing the differences of both, and learning how to use them appropriately in different contexts. In the same way that language learners become bilingual, dialect learners can become bi-dialectic. But this requires a shift in the perception of language teaching methods, from one where the goal of language teaching is to subvert the first language (L1), to one where there is a tolerance for methods that recognize and use the language and culture of the learners to teach the Standard variety.

Evidence that L1 culture and language is seen as having a negative influence on L2 acquisition can be seen in the somewhat blind acceptance of L2 teachers around the world. English as a Second Language teachers, are hired solely on their native speaking ability and non-native speaking (NNS) teachers, whose proficiency is on par, are frequently overlooked. NNS teachers can discriminate, modify and transform teaching methodologies and materials

to better reflect the experience and requirements of language learning (Seidlhofer, 1999, p.236). In addition, as noted by Ellis, NNS teacher's beliefs are "remarkably impervious to education and training" (Ellis, 2002, p.99). They change and adjust curriculum and pedagogies that are often conceived by authors who are far removed from the reality of learners. NNS teachers are in a much better position to respond to the learning needs of their students. They can rely on their own intuition about language because they have internalized linguistic and cognitive knowledge both as language students and as teachers, and understand how to use a cross-lingual approach in meeting the needs of their students. However, tackling the issue of a global perception of language and methods is ambitious. I have chosen to narrow my focus on the black literacy issue in North America, because I think it embodies many of the current educational attitudes, and misunderstandings, about language and language learning, that are reflected on a global scale.

Black English (BE) is linguistically and culturally distinctive from mainstream America. What is perhaps most significant for the purpose of this paper, is that this dialect is durable; that is, it is not influenced by the dialect which surrounds it. Numerous studies in phonological changes in the United States have shown considerable divergence over time in major American cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Los Angeles, and the dialects of these centres are considerably different from each other, and from what they were 50 years ago. However, these changes are found almost exclusively within the white communities, and not black communities. In the 1970s, in order to investigate and understand the grammar of BE, a number of sociolinguistic studies of spontaneous speech were conducted across America which showed, " a remarkably consistent grammar used by black inner city youth in cities as diverse as New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles and San Francisco" (Labov, 1995, p.4). These studies demonstrate that although BE incorporates many rules of Southern (the area they had dispersed from) phonology,

morphology and syntax, it is not influenced by the surrounding dialect changes of the area in which it exists. The consistency of BE across geographically distant areas, and the preservation of its distinctiveness, show that it became more similar, despite living amidst communities whose dialects became less similar. The white dialect in Los Angeles and New York are different, but the black dialect in these cities is similar. The durability of BE demonstrates that this dialect is impervious to the normal mechanisms of language change in society.

Most languages have changed significantly through time; however, the same durability of BE, described above, is also evident historically. Corpora of earlier BE exists in a few enclaves around the world: Dominica, Liberia and Nova Scotia, and due to the geographical isolation of these linguistic enclaves, the language has retained many of its original characteristics. Corpora of early BE also exists in the historical transcriptions of Virginia slaves from the mid nineteenth century. Today, a widely available modern corpora of BE exists in the form of rap music. In 2005, Darrin Howe, a professor with the University of Calgary, conducted a study which compared the available corpora of earlier BE with corpora of modern BE -rap music. Howe demonstrated that several of the negative structures have remained very stable over the last century and a half . While he cites several examples, I will cite a few containing the use of negative postponing construction to illustrate the point.

- You don't know nobody what don't want to hire nobody to do nothin' does you?
(Henry Garry, ex-slave, b. 1863, Sumter Co., AL) (Howe, 2005, p.171)

- you don't send *no hooks*, no nuttin' man.
(9th Wonder, Whatever You Say, 5:24) (Howe, 2005, p. 186)

I entered the 1863 ex-slave quote, noted above, into *Google* and I present three songs, from the many choices, which demonstrate the same negative construction found in the 20th century.

- You don't need nobody
  (Myrtle Jackson) circa 1950

- I don't want nobody to give me nothing
  (James Brown) 1969

- Don't want to hurt noone
  (z-ro) circa 1980.

Geographical proximity is normally a great equalizer of dialects. Most dialects tend to become more similar to the dominant dialect when living in close proximity, or when their speakers are immersed in another dialect. This is called *dialect levelling* and defined as:

> . . . a form of standardization whereby local variations of speech lose their distinctive, regional features in favor of a more urban or mainstream dialect. This means that the speech forms of different parts of the country are becoming more similar over time and there is a reduction in language diversity (Kerswill, 2009, para 1).

However, this has not been the case for BE, and the exact opposite has occurred. This dialect has become even more established through time. If neither time nor geographical proximity has impacted the dialect, or resulted in a greater number of community members acquiring SE, then how will immersion in an education system that uses another dialect (SE) result in a different outcome? The population highlights the value of establishing a learning environment that recognizes learner culture and dialect, not as obstacles, but as effective and essential tools to efficient learning.

The following summary of Lisa Delpit's principles on the education of black American children can be applied to education of second language learners around the globe. My addition is in brackets:

> Among the needs identified are the need to . . . ensure . . . access to conventions/strategies necessary for succeeding in the context of American society (global society), connecting students' knowledge and experiences from their social contexts to knowledge acquired in the schools and acknowledgement and recognition of students' home cultures. (Lisa Delpit, n.d.)

However, educators assume that, unlike second language learners, black children begin with a full understanding of SE, even though it has been proven that the non-standard language these students bring to school severely and negatively affects their overall educational success. Attempts by linguists and educators to address this language issue have not been embraced by mainstream educators or community members, who continue to view language and education as two separate issues (Labov, 1983).

Not recognizing the cultural and language differences between the classroom and its students creates an environment where students feel devalued. The culture and language black children bring to school is not understood or recognized, and can cause communication to break down between student and teacher. For example, black children are more likely to be raised to respond to more explicit directives and instruction as: "Put the scissors away". Whereas a teacher used to children responding to a more suggestive approach, such as, "Is this where the scissors belong?" might receive a direct answer of "No" –not the expected response of compliance! (Delpit, 1988, p.288). Adding to this is the difficulty caused by the significant differences in dialect (lexicon, grammar), between home and school. Given the socio-cultural and linguistic differences it is easy to imagine how the classroom can become a place of confusion ("What is wrong with me?") or conflict, with the result that students begin

to develop a negative predisposition towards the target language and its members. For the black population in the United States, the disconnect between the language and culture of school and home has fuelled a divide, and subsequent marginalization and is a form of racism.

Academic Statistics: Graphing a Story

The National Centre for Educational Statistics (2009) reported that between 1980 and 2003, the trend in the reading gap between white and black, 9- and 13-year-old students, decreased only marginally. In 1988, the percentage difference between scores of 9-year-old black and white children was 12%, and in 2004, it was 11%. The Office of Special Education has also reported a disproportionate representation of black, and ethnically and linguistically diverse, school children in special education programs, a situation that has persisted for three decades (Klingner, J.K., 2005). In a 2007 memorandum, to the State Directors of Education, Alexa Posny, Director, Office of the Special Education Programs expressed her concerns about the findings in *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* a 2004 statue, which stated:

> . . . African-American children are identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance at rates greater than their white counterparts; (3) more minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population ; (4) in the 1998-1999 school year, African-American children represented 14 .8% of the population aged 6 through 21, yet comprised 20 .2% of all children with disabilities served in our schools ; and (5) studies have found that schools with predominately white students and teachers have placed disproportionately high numbers of their minority students into special education (Office of Special Education Programs, 2007, p.1).

The memorandum concluded with a request for Directors of Special Education to closely monitor "inappropriate identification" of special needs students. Given the demographics in special education classes, language is a related factor. As North America enters into the global world and economy, there is, and will be, an increase in the degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The disproportionate number of black children and other minorities, who are not making it in the mainstream classroom, takes on a new urgency when considering that an education that is not equitable is a denial of human rights, in that access to opportunities for economic, social and political attainment usually requires using the language of those who control access. When viewed through this lens the issue of disproportion becomes an issue of social justice.

HISTORY OF BLACK AMERICAN EDUCATION

John Henrick Clarke, founder of the African Heritage Studies Association, in 1960, expressed clearly the attitude towards black literacy in the following quote:

"Powerful people cannot afford to educate the people that they oppress, because once you are truly educated, you will not ask for power, you will take it." (Clarke, 2008)

The black American culture emerged as a result of the colonization of slaves of both African and European descent. For black Americans, the collective experiences of forced migration, slavery, and then the struggle to become members of American society, led to the development of a separate culture and dialect. Continued social, economic and political segregation resulted in a cultural identity that sustained itself despite living amidst mainstream American culture.

The history of black American education has not been one that has fostered literacy. Teaching, literacy and reading skills were considered criminal acts during the 18th century. The enactment of the slave codes of Virginia 1750, (below) became the model for other colonies. The purpose of the slave codes was to restrict slave behaviour as a means of preventing rebellion. In order to achieve this goal most, if not all, civil liberties, protection and privileges were denied.

> **Virginia, 1705** – "If any slave resists his master...correcting such a slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction...the master shall be free of all punishment...as if such accident never happened." (PBS, n.d.)

In the courts they were denied representation and were disallowed all testimony against a white man. To further ensure that the slave population was kept disempowered, education was also completely restricted, and in 1739, the South Carolina slave code was revised with the following amendment:

- No slave shall be taught to write, work on Sunday, or work more than 15 hours per day in Summer, and 14 hours in Winter. (PBS, n.d.)

Approximately 100 years later little had changed, as is evident in the tone of Alabama slave code of 1833:

> **Alabama, 1833, section 31** - "Any person or persons who attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write, shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred and fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars." (Slave Codes, n.d.)

Although slavery was abolished with the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, by Abraham Lincoln, the black population was not allowed full participation in society. They were handcuffed by such laws as the literacy test requirements to vote. Not only were their literacy levels already low, due to being denied education as slaves, but the intentional difficulty and highly technical language of the literacy tests, chosen for black people, ensured that they would fail, and thus be denied the right to vote. (A sample text of a literacy test is quoted in "Appendix A"). While emancipation now gave blacks a right to education, the inability of blacks to enact laws that would provide them with resources for education was impossible. Though free, the majority of the black population remained disenfranchised and segregated.

In 1951, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), local parents and community groups, in various parts of the country, began filing several lawsuits against school segregation. These cases reached the Supreme Court and the *Brown v Board of Education* decision of 1954, held that segregation, in public education, violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. By ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, the Supreme Court mandated the desegregation of schools across America. ("Appendix B" contains the wording of the ruling).

However this decision did not level the playing field because it did not require immediate desegregation of schools, or even a time line. Since then, the civil rights movement of black America has effected change; however, the effects of decades of segregation resulted in the development of a language and culture that is distinct from mainstream America.

Victim Diaspora

A diaspora is a group of people who, though dispersed due to migration or other causes, are united by some common tie that brings them together. Robin Cohen (2008), in his book: *Global Diasporas,* described African America as a victim diaspora caused by a:

> a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group; a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement even where home has become more vestigial; and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism. (p.17)

Tempered and hardened through time by struggle, BE has remained resistant to change, despite both internal forces (acceptance of the need for SE to gain economic and political empowerment) and external forces (participation in main stream America). The result is a

dialect that is resistant to outside influences. It is a dialect that has remained intact despite its close proximity to a SE society, and despite pressure from mainstream society to change.

Dialect

A dialect is viewed as "regional and social class variety of the language which differs from the standard in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and are seldom written down at all" (Cook: 2003, p13). However, caution needs to be taken when adapting this definition, as many dialects are written down; for example, the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) has codified its dialect in *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (1982). NL once an important contributor to the economic prosperity of Canada, is geographically isolated from the rest of Canada. Its dialect has continued to develop and codification is possible. Now, the dialect is valued as a Canadian heritage. The dialect is still in use in the province, despite an outmigration of people, over the last 30 years, to other provinces to seek employment or education. Once outside, Newfoundlanders quickly adopt SE, but retain their own dialect. They become bi-dialectic, and easily switch between the SE and NL dialects, as circumstances demand such as, while working on the mainland, or attending university.

Most dialects flourish due to a lack of outside influence, but this trend changes as soon as greater exposure to another language occurs. In the case of BE, what is different is that this dialect has survived due to the social isolation from mainstream America, as a result of its slave origins, and subsequent 200 years of segregation. During this time, the black culture and language has remained an essential aspect of the identity of black America, and continues to flourish and thrive despite its close proximity to white America.

DIALECT VS LANGUAGE: *I hear ya.*

While BE is a dialect of English, it shares similar attributes of being a separate language (Johnson, ed.;1999):

- the perception of the other language as being additive –in the sense that the other language is seen as an addition to language repertoire and does not threaten L1 identity. *A co-student that I attended university with, and who was raised in an inner city black community could easily move between BE and SE and also used code switching strategies in both BE and SE to communicate a point. Likewise my father was fully bilingual and was at ease in both the French and English (or a combination of the two) cultures and languages of Canada. Although he always said, that the French language was more 'elegant' than English!* . Alternatively, the perception of the other language as being subtractive in that the L2 takes away from their identity by undermining the L1. *Among some members of the Black community there is a belief that learning SE "signifies adopting White attitudes of superiority." (*Ogbu, 1999, pp 170)

- in order to complete meaningful utterances in another language requires knowledge of both languages. *In order to translate the following BE exert from the bible, requires the student must understand where the grammar of BE and SE intersect.*

"[31]And Big Daddy seen every thin' dat he had made, an', behold, it wuz very pimp-tight. And da evening an' da morning wuz da sixth day." (Ebonics Translator)

Big Daddy = God (noun); pimp-tight =good (adjective). In both dialects they represent the same word class. This is an obvious example, which most students would easily and quickly understand. However, these words could be used in a discussion or lesson plan on the different impact (negative vs. positive connotations of words) between BE and SE.

More obscure would be the use of the participle /seen/, because there is not an equivalent use of past tense in English. /seen/ is used in BE to express both past (saw) and past perfect (have seen).

- speakers are required to be multi-competent in relevant situations, and have the ability to switch style and register within one language *I am currently teaching immigrants and we spend time focusing on the different language used in different social settings. For example, the more formal language used during an interview or at work versus the informal language used in the classroom or with peers.*

There are enough grey areas between what defines a dialect and what defines a language that "linguists do not make a technical distinction between languages and dialects; the difference is more political than linguistic. It is therefore technically correct to say that black people have a language of their own" (Labov, 1983, p.366). An example of the political difference that Labov alludes to, can be seen in the bilingual language policy of Canada. In 1763, when the British conquered Canada, the French were well established, and their new British rulers were the minority. In order to maintain peace and order, the British wisely allowed the French to retain their religion, culture and language. Despite the subsequent migration of English-speaking settlers, over the next two centuries, Quebec retained its cohesiveness as a French enclave, and its language and culture continued to flourish alongside English Canada. In 1960, Canada adopted a bilingualism policy that recognized both French and English as official languages. This policy gave the French language the same status as English, and today many Canadians are fully bilingual and most partially. When we shift our focus to the NL dialect, it is possible to see how a dialect, that has never had official political status, has fared during the same time frame. Today, this dialect has status only in that province, where it is an essential aspect of NL culture and society. It also flourishes on the "mainland" wherever Newfoundlanders come together. When they talk, in their dialect, it is often

difficult to understand them, and not many people make the effort, because it's just not necessary. Newfoundlanders have to speak SE in order to succeed politically, economically and socially in Canada, but Canadians do not have to speak or understand the NL dialect. The French language survived as a result of political (external) forces, and the NL dialect survived as a result of social (internal) forces. BE has been forged by the political and social forces that maintained segregation, and subsequent isolation from mainstream America. BE like French or NL dialect, is rule governed and not just a series of random utterances, it follows specific and consistent grammatical and phonological rules. The political difference between a language and dialect that is that a language has status and "place" outside of its geographical or social borders, (as in the case of the French language in Canada), while dialects such as NL and BE do not. I may need to learn French to work in Canada, but I do not need to learn the NL dialect, and white America does not have to learn BE. However both meet the linguistic criteria of a language.

But what about SE? How has it achieved and maintained it's almost global status? Henry Widdowson, (1994), considered to be an authority in the field of applied linguistics, describes SE as a dialect that has achieved special status:

> It is a variety, a kind of superposed dialect which is socially sanctioned for institutional use and therefore particularly well suited to written communication. . . . Standard English, unlike other dialects, is essentially a written variety and mainly designed for institutional purposes, education, administration, business, etc. (p. 380).

What exactly is SE, and who is the keeper of the standard? How do we know when we are following the standard? In discussing this issue with a colleague; who is an ESL instructor for immigrant students, and an IELTS (an internationally recognized testing system for SE proficiency) examiner, pointed out that her standards are, logically enough, based on IELTS standards. However, she is aware and recognizes that these standards are specific to only a

fraction of the many English standards that exist; for example Indian English is the English standard used in India's media, and for institutional use (education, business, politics). Another example is Singlish which is an English standard for Singapore. However, because IELTS has the lion's share of (arguably a monopoly) the English teaching industry, its standards are recognized around the world as "the standard," despite the existence of many Englishes. Within the ESL industry, there are significant commercial interests in maintaining one standard. This is not to dispute that a standard is essential in today's globalized world. We have to agree on the lexicon and the grammar so that we can efficiently communicate to: broker business deals, reconcile disputes, negotiate conflict. However, people adjust English to meet many other purposes between different cultures, with the goal to communicate, not just uphold SE. The many dialects shaped by circumstances outside of "mainstream" are no less valid than SE; however, they do not have the prestige of SE.

For the black population, because it is a North American dialect, it is based on SE; however, many of its attributes -especially its durability -puts it closer to its own separate language. BE is not just a series of random mistakes, but a language that is rule-governed, derived from SE, and not a deviation from it. In this paper, I will refer to those who speak both BE and SE as bi-dialectic, in the same sense that someone who speaks two languages is considered bilingual.

With the relationship of dialect and language in mind, the focus shifts from an education system that wants to "correct" bad English, to one that focuses on developing bi-dialectic students. Such a shift in focus also demands that the black population in America be seen as a people/culture distinct but equal. *This then shifts the educational focus from remediation to language learning.*

When we seek to remediate students, we seek to change them, they are wrong, we are right, because who they are is not acceptable. Children do not start school feeling deficient, but rather come to school full of promise and interest. However, when they arrive, they are told they are lacking something which everyone else has but they don't –but what is it? For black children, Lisa Delpit (1998) describes this as a lack of knowledge about the cultural rules and codes that white children learn at home and bring to school: how to dress, act, socialize, talk in SE. Black children don't have the same resources that their middle class mates have, in terms of the school's language and cultural knowledge, but they have "currency" in their own language and culture. Unfortunately, their currency at school does not have a lot of value. They are expected to immediately assume the culture and language of the school and when they cannot, because the culture they bring is different from the school culture, it is no wonder that they disengage from school life out of frustration. Delpit (1998), describes this as a sort of culture shock, and I think this is a good analogy. I have also observed this type of frustration with immigrant students here, who in adjusting to Canadian culture, go through periods when they lose motivation and interest. At mid-term they "burn-out" and decide to take a break from school by dropping out. This is a bad idea, because they only have a window of time (three years), during which they can attend publicly funded ESL schools, after which that they have to pay a very high premium for ESL education. For example, during March of one year, one of my students began to frequently miss class and frequently showed up late, and I noticed in class that she wasn't participating and engaging in group activities. I sensed that she was getting ready to drop out. I knew she was an avid photographer, so I asked her if she could prepare a power point presentation on her culture. This got her interested again, and her energy returned. I think she had been trying so hard to adjust to Canadian life that she had lost sight of what it felt like to be adjusted –to be the person she was in her country! But even more than that, I think she needed a chance to test

her own progress, (flex her muscles) by doing something that was challenging, but personally meaningful to her. For effective learning to take place, students need to feel that their lives have value and purpose.

Public Perception of Dialect

There is a systemic racism that exists in the world for people who are different from mainstream. This is evident in the polarization created by the educational debate concerning black literacy. At its worst, the public perception of the dialect of black Americans has been perceived as a sub-standard, or a corrupted form of English, spoken by a community that is cognitively deficient, as a result of cultural deprivation.

> The cultural deprivation theorists believe that characteristics such as poverty cause low income children to experience cultural deprivation and irreversible cognitive deficits. This theory suggests that low-income students do not achieve in school because of the culture of poverty in which they live. (Newell, 2000, p.83).

There may be some truth to this statement, insofar as the resources given to schools reflect the socio-economic status of the area. Schools in primarily African American districts have poorer facilities, fewer supplies, lower teacher pay and training, and less parental involvement. There is also the added issue that lower income, or working class families most commonly use BE dialect in their community and at home, and it is in these districts where the lowest reading achievement scores are found.

Poverty or Dialect

In 1990, John Rickford, conducted an analysis of test scores of two neighbouring school districts in California. In the affluent district of Palo Alto, the reading and writing scores increased from the 96th percentile in the third grade, to a 99th percentile in the 6th grade. In the

neighbouring impoverished black community of East Palo Alto, the reading and writing decreased from the 16th percentile in the third grade, to the 3rd percentile in the 6th grade. This study, and its findings, illustrates that not only do black children begin school in the bottom percentile, but the longer they stay in school, the more they fall behind, while for wealthier, white districts the exact opposite occurs (Rickford, 1998).

SE is the dialect of those in power, for people, whose dialect is different, they are not able to be active participants in mainstream 'power' society, and are often marginalized. This is also true of the black community, whose dialect prevents them from participating in the institutions that offer the most opportunities for economic, social and political advancement. This is not an issue that is unique to the black population, and is something that is mirrored in immigrant populations, although their marginalization is usually temporary. Here, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where there is a recent influx of Middle Eastern (Syrian, Iraq/Iran and Egyptian), and Asian immigrants (China, Japan and Nepal), who, in moving to Canada, temporarily lose their social, and professional status (as doctors, nurses, accountants, business tycoons) until they have acquired the necessary language ability to fully participate. Within both communities there is recognition that acquiring English is necessary; however, the difference between immigrant populations and the black population is one of focus on overcoming the language barriers. Immigrants recognize that in order to succeed they need to learn another language, and that is their educational priority. For black students, the education system has not viewed language as a priority, despite the barriers it presents. Immigrants understand and expect to invest time and effort in learning the language before being able to move into 'mainstream' jobs or education. There are many ESL schools and organizations devoted to English language learning for immigrants that assist them in making the transition to life in another culture and language. Black children, on the other hand, are expected to

move right into "mainstream", without any support or acknowledgement that their dialect and culture negatively affects their chances of succeeding in school.

For people who immigrate to North America, learning another language is seen (for the most part) as additive; there is a clear distinction between the role of their own language and the role of English. However, for the black population, the motivation to learn becomes stalled, because the distinction between their dialect and SE is not seen as an issue for educators, but black students well understand that learning SE is an issue for them. They know they need SE in order to succeed at school, in university and in the workplace. They don't want to be "fixed" because BE has value to its members –it forms a distinct cultural boundary that embodies the heritage and cohesiveness of their community. The flip side of this is that a dialect barrier prevents them from fully participating in mainstream society, and the result has been that black communities have suffered economically and politically.

The 2009, United States census reported that the white population had a poverty rate of 12.3%, and the Black population poverty rate was 25.8%. (United States Census Bureau) A demographic data analysis conducted by the PewResearchCenter (2011), reported that a typical black household had $5,677 in wealth (assets minus debts) in 2009, a typical Hispanic household had $6,325 in wealth, and a typical white household had $113,149 (*I did a double take on the household income, but the quoted figures are correct*).

There may be other reasons that contribute to these statistics, the Hispanic population might send most of its money to its home country, or they might not report, or underreport, all their earnings, if they are illegal immigrants. However, both the Hispanic and black population have a language barrier in common which prevents them from acquiring "status" jobs, such as CEO's, managers or other power jobs. For immigrants, language is an obvious barrier to wealth, while for the black population their language barrier is less obvious, and they are doubly disadvantaged by an education system that insists that BE is not a barrier. It is ironic

that in an economic sense, the black population have an immigrant status in their own country. Language *does* create borders.

BI-DIALECTIC: *I'm am*

Immersion in a SE based education system has not worked, due to a lack of understanding of the resiliency of this dialect, in the face of outside influences. As noted above, their dialect has maintained its distinctiveness, despite living for centuries in America, while SE has undergone significant change through history and within geographical boundaries. A student does not become bilingual by transforming their L1, but rather by adding an L2, and the same stands for dialects. However, schools don't view BE in this way, but rather as something that needs to be fixed or removed, because it's broken. Interestingly, even school children talk about their dialect as 'bad English.' This comment can be found in almost every paper where black children discuss their language. They have internalized the view point of society, but when they say 'bad English' they are only making a comparison with SE, because their language has great value to them. They come to school to learn "proper" English, so they can be dual citizens –citizens of black America and citizens of white America. They do not come to be assimilated. Their goals are clear, but schools have failed in providing a forum for students to develop the language skills necessary for success – to become bi-dialectic. Parents, students and teachers know the goal, but not how to achieve it.

Black English Dialect Distinctiveness

BE is noted as having several consistent linguistic characteristics that differ from SE, which can, and do, interfere with the development of reading (Labov, 1983).

Habitual use of /be/

BE: He be working Tuesday.

SE: He works on Tuesdays.

Absence of the copular /is/ and /are/

BE: She my sister

SE: She's my sister

Absence of third person singular, which extends to subject/verb agreement, which is barely represented in the grammar:

BE: She write poetry

SE: She writes poetry

Absence of possessives or the use of possessive inflections for absolute possessives:

BE: This is mines.

SE: This is mine.

High deletion of /ed/ for regular past tenses:

BE: He walk home.

SE: He walked home

Altered syntax in questions and /ing/ is shortened to /in/ almost 100% of the time.

BE: Why they ain't growin?

SE: Why aren't they growing?

All of the above are examples of a few of the grammatical differences that require students to relearn, or learn as if for the first time, SE grammar. However, it is the loss of information at the end of words that creates the greatest difficulty in identifying the relationship between the spoken and written word.

Problems in Language Acquisition with Dialects

The high degree of a contraction/deletion process, at the end of words, leads to a great deal more of homogeny in the vocabulary, and in inconsistencies in grammar between spoken and written text. The problems in making the connection between the full form of SE written word and text are particularly obscure for black children in the very beginning stages of reading acquisition. These specific dialect differences cause children to experience difficulty in learning how to read, because the dialect they are learning in does not coincide with the dialect they come to school with. The result is that a phonemic connection between spoken and written words can be stalled at every stage, in the process of learning to read. Below are some of the effects of the deletion process: (Labov, 1983)

α. Habitual use of /be/ and subsequent absence of copula auxiliary *is, are*

/They be hitting on peoples/ when translated to SE requires a much expanded version /They go around hitting people all the time/ to convey the same meaning in SE. (p.367)

β. Disappearance of inflections at the end of words, and corresponding difference in grammatical endings (plural, past tense, possessive, and contractions) of spoken and written words:

a. Dropping of the copula such that /I'm/ becomes /I/, resulting in difficulty in analysing and distinguishing /I'm/ with /I am/, and the contracted form can be used along with an added copula i.e.: / I'm am/ (p.373)

b. Plural –often absent and when the plural /s/ is present, it is applied to words that do not normally carry a plural inflection: deers, sheeps, fishes.(p.371-72)

c. Past tense of both regular and irregular verbs:

Rolled =roll; missed = miss; healed=heal

d. Deletion of final t or d in simple words:

Cold =coal; tent=ten; field=feel; went=when; told=toll; lost=loss (p.375)

These differences result in a weak association between what is written and what is spoken. The grammatical difference, especially as it relates to contractions, has been shown to result in a profound phonological and phonemic disadvantage at the very start of a child's reading acquisition process. Developing phonemic awareness is a well documented precursor to pre-reading readiness (Spector, 2001). Where other children can learn to decode and identify sound/word relationships, black children cannot as readily make this phonemic association because, as noted above, their words are different. Therefore, learning to read is easily derailed at a very early development stage, resulting in a cumulative educational deficit. It seems a logical extension that the first lesson should be developing awareness that the SE dialect they are learning in is different from their dialect. This factor would give children a different frame of reference to work from, and prevent the confusion created by the differences between the written word and the spoken word. Lisa Delpit (1998) described how one native Alaskan teacher teaches her Athabascan students by comparing and contrasting formal (SE) and their "heritage" English. Students are given opportunities to engage in both dialects. This allows them to progress through subject matter, while becoming bi-dialectic. Most importantly, she explicitly separates the two dialects so there will be minimal confusion. (p.293)

Without an awareness of the way words are used in the dialect, teachers would focus only on the pronunciation, and not reading for meaning. Not only is this counterproductive, as the child doesn't understand the difference, but a child that is constantly corrected will likely shut down, and seek out strategies to withdraw from the learning experience, by speaking as little as possible, speaking very quietly or just not at all! Constant correction without progress will raise the anxiety levels of learners, and the association between its affect on a learner has been proven to have a direct negative correlation with cognition.

Stephen Krashen, a noted linguist, educational researcher and bilingual activist, describes this in a *monitor model* to show that constant correction can lead to learners becoming overly careful and monitor their output to the point of becoming unwilling to speak (Ortega, 2009). This behaviour limits their interaction and engagement in the classroom, which in turn decreases the amount of time they spend using, or working with, the language. Time spent in learning avoidance strategies detract from concentration and mental effort in academic learning. "Foreign language anxiety is a measurable, L2 specific affective variable that is associated with a number of symptoms, including lower grades, lower proficiency performance, difficulty with processing, and learning new L2 material, reticence and L2 risk avoiding behaviours" (Ortega, 2009, p. 213). In other words, if a child, or learner begins to anticipate failure, and feels constantly evaluated, their ability to learn is severely affected, resulting in a downward spiral of poor performance, which is apparent in the dismal academic statistics for black children.

DIALECT TEACHING METHODS: '*Same same different*''

Using dialect teaching methods requires knowledge of the dialect, so that teachers can decide between what is a mistake and what is a feature of the dialect or language. One excellent reference to interference and other problems in language acquisition, for several languages, is *Learner English*, by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith (2001). In this book, they provide a background to languages, and describe the phonological, grammatical and lexical differences that cause the most difficulty for English language learners. I have used their analysis to focus on pronunciation and spelling problems with a Vietnamese student, (she spoke a Dravidian language) whose pronunciation was severely impacting her ability to achieve fluency. Her lack of fluency also affected her spelling, because she wasn't able to rely on her pronunciation to sound out words. The example below is the type of clear and useful explanation provided in *Learner English*, and served as my starting point in creating a lesson plan.

> 2. Dravidian languages (*Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu)* do not have aspirated consonants. This means that English initial /p/, /t/ and /k/, which are normally aspirated, are hard for learners to produce correctly; they typically substitute retroflex consonants. Hearers may interpret these as /b/, /d/ and /g/ respectively, hearing *pear, ten* and *could,* for example, as *bear, den* and *good.* (Swan and Smith, 2001, p.245).

Using this information, I was able to design lesson plans that specifically addressed the language issues that were causing her problems. The lesson plan consisted of: using minimal pairs, rhythms, exaggerating sounds, creating sentences with key words to read aloud, listening activities, noting the difference in the aspiration of similar phonemes.

The information in *Learner English*, helped me to understand that her pronunciation was not a result of reading error, or a speaking deficit, but an aspect of her language. The same principal can be applied to BE. For example, knowledge that this dialect features

consonant cluster simplification of the past tense marker /ed/ would allow the teacher to be able to distinguish between a child who reads /I missed him/ as /I miss him/ not as an error in understanding the meaning, but as correctly reproduced in the dialect of the child. Armed with this knowledge, I can now focus on lesson plans and activities that would help students notice the difference between dialects, teach them how to form past tense with regular verbs, and develop a 'seed' vocabulary for use in future lesson plans. For example, in order to get students to begin noticing the past tense morphology, I would write the following words on the board: /tried, played, turned, started, waited/, and ask them to guess what the story was about. At this point, I would accept anything -within reason! Then I would ask them if they think the story *has happened* or is a story about something that *will be happening*. If they guess correctly I will ask them to tell me why; hopefully, they will answer, "because words end in /ed/." If they did not, I would ask them to find what each word has in common =/ed/. Then, I would read the story, and if they hadn't already guessed from the introduction exercise, I would ask them to decide *when* the story happened. I would present the story with the past inflected words in bold, and with a 'past tense' Cuisenaire rod in my hand as a cue, I would raise the rod and pause each time I read a past tense verb. The cueing action of raising the rod would 'justify' a pause and time to fully enunciate the word. Also, all students love, and pay attention too theatrics!

*Last night, I **tried** to do my homework, while my sister **played** the violin in our room. I **turned** on my stereo to drown her out but it didn't work, she just **played** louder. We both **started** to giggle and **waited** for our mom to start yelling!*

I would ask: "When did this happen?" We could discuss what words show the past tense, including the past tense marker of /last night/. Then I would have a student read it aloud, asking her to raise the rod on the past tense words (and not giggle!). Using a rod will

slow down her reading on the key words, and allow her enough time to fully pronounce the past tense inflection.

Students could then write their own stories using all the words (past verbs) featured in bold type. The words could become the 'seed' words for recycling in future lesson that would focus on both pronunciation and tense/aspect of regular verbs. They could also be used to create skits in both dialects for a presentation to the class. Perhaps a presentation titled: *Skits with tudes and skits with dudes*

Another aspect of dialect learners is that in dialects "correct" forms are preserved in specific contexts, and this is true of BE. For example, a common tendency in non-standard dialects, and typical of BE, is the variant placement of the grammatical morphemes, /ed/, which is often deleted, at the end of regular verbs ; "It *look* just like Corney." However, this is not evidence that grammatical information is missing, or not understood, as the /ed/ is included in prevocalic (before a vowel) position; "I look*ed* at it." (Poplack, 2006, p.461).

Labov describes a "favourable context" for introducing words that will maximize the full pronunciation, and bring out the full form of the word more clearly. For example, for word endings that are commonly deleted it is best to introduce the word embedded in a sentence: *We will have a test on Monday* is introduced instead of 1. *We will have a test*, or 2. introducing the word *test* in isolation (Labov, 1983, p.382).

 Here are some strategies that will help students note and pronounce the full form of words:

- Pronouncing multi-syllabic words backwards. This method causes learners to notice the sound relationships between the syllables by processing the sound information in a new and novel way. For example, students would be shown several multi-syllabic words using /*ing/,* and instructed to pronounce the last syllable /*ing/* and then add the first syllable /*test/* and while repeating 'clap

out' the syllables, to ensure both syllables (the full form of the word) are pronounced.

- hand-clapping/rhythm for syllables –the words used would be the content vocabulary from –history, math, English, gym!
  - syllable!
  - rhythm
  - clapping
  - recycling
- hand-gestures to represent stress –with palm facing down students would move hand up and down in response to hearing the stress. For example, the word *running* –hand moves up on the first syllable (stressed), down on the second.
- Stops can be represented by the tips of fingers and thumb clamping, other phonemes could be illustrated by duplicating the position of the mouth with fingers and the thumb representing the position of the tongue. For example, with the ending /*ed*/, the tips of the fingers and the thumb would move open and then close.
- Noticing word endings can also be illuminated using manipulatives, such as Cuisenaire rods, to compare and contrast words that are inflected, i.e. words ending with or without /*ed*/. Different coloured blocks could also be used to represent the different phonemic sounds i.e., ending /*s*/ or /*ed*/. This technique could also be used to show contractions. For example, /*I am/* represented by two blocks and /*I'm/* by two blocks laid on top of each other, and progressing to the contraction being represented by one block of equal length. However, in order to overcome the fusing, and subsequent deletion, of the copula in

contractions: such that: /*I am*/ proceeds through to become /*I*/, in the phrase,

/ay aem/ →/ ay am/ →/ aym/ →/ ay/, it is best to avoid the contracted forms,

at least in the initial stages of learning to read. Later, after full forms are

mastered, the contracted form can be introduced.

I have used some of these techniques with ESL students, and I have seen students master the

pronunciation and notice the morphology of a word with greater efficiency, than what I have

seen when the focus is on the beginning of a word. Language students (and this is especially

true of BE learners) often pay more attention to the beginning of words. Indeed, it is

sometimes possible to verbally communicate meaning by using only the beginning of words!

Also, the context can be unpacked with the use of other words, i.e., /*I bake a cake yesterday*/

–here the time adjective /*yesterday*/ marks the sentence for the past inflection /*ed*/, and the

past sense is communicated, and understood, without the use of the inflection /*ed*/. Labov

noted in an experiment that students "lose confidence" in the alphabet –that is they tend not

to pay attention to word endings, or make fewer attempts to read the full word with

increasing letters in the word. This is also a point that my L2 learners often need to focus on

and benefit from the techniques below:

- Activities that demonstrate the different phonemes of /ed/, /s/ For example
  students would be given three index cards with one of each of the different
  phonemes written on it -/*t*/, /*d*/, /*ed*/. On the board or on a flip chart would be
  three columns for each phoneme:

/t/	/d/	/ed/
1	6	11
2	7	12
3	8	13
4	9	14
5	10	15

Students are broken up into three groups, and asked to hold up the index card with the ending sound of the word, as they hear it. In order to win a point, one student in the group, or all students, would have to hold up the correct phoneme. The teacher then reads from a "key word" list. For example, teacher says "walked" and students hold up an index card with /t/, and the team number is placed in the /t/ column. The team with the most correct points "wins". At the end of the activity, either the teacher or a student can complete the grid by writing the words on a flip chart, or on the blackboard. The words used in this activity could then be recycled in reading and writing activity, so students will have a solid base of familiar words to work from –with the goal that they will begin to generalize this past tense rule to new words.

Dialect Curriculum

As a language teacher I have experienced how the L1 of my students interferes with – or advances -L2 acquisition. For example, in South Asian languages there is no equivalent to English articles, prepositions are used as postpositions and verbs are normally placed at the end of a sentence. These are just two examples that cause difficulty for these students while learning English. My awareness of the differences between the structure of their language, helps me to focus on these areas by using a contrastive analysis approach, by showing how they might reproduce a phrase in their language, and how it is reproduced in English. At some point in learning English, they will become aware of the differences (or "fossilize" incorrect use). If early on, I am able to illuminate some of the differences, then my students are better able to analyse English. A contrastive analysis approach is an effective tool/strategy to acquisition –especially at the beginning stages -until students have mastered some basic

English grammar rules, and built a vocabulary that they can use. Prior to this stage, language acquisition can be, and often is, a hit-and-miss approach especially if there are missing elements in their lexicon, such as in the case of BE, where there is a tendency to use a zero form in contractions:

/They will be there/ –/They'll be there/ is heard as: /They be there/.

By illuminating the differences for students using a contrastive analysis approach, they are better able to approximate the target language from the very start.

A black child brings to school a different culture, a different history, that is important to them, but not the focus in mainstream education, or even well known outside of their community. In order to overcome the missing cultural knowledge, a teacher needs to start where the student is, within their culture, and then show where they exist in relation to white culture –to develop a frame of reference. In doing this, a student can find answers to such questions as: Where are the intersection points between cultures? How do they compare and contrast? What was happening while this was happening? For example, the role of leaders such as Jesse Jackson, could be placed in the context of public school history, by studying not only who he was, and what he did, but what was happening around him politically or socially in the white culture. This could be done by a critical analysis of the leadership styles, by finding the answers to such questions as: "How did his leadership style differ from that of President Kennedy?" "Who was the audience of each leader?" The placement of black culture, in the history of the school curriculum, would give them a chance to see where they exist in a historical context, and/or why are they not included, and; moreover, what other aspects of history are not included, such as Aboriginal history? By looking at these issues students will begin to use critical thinking skills and have a sense of agency in the school culture.

Research activities could focus on the differences in families -extended families, family loyalty, alternative families, family culture. Because many black people have lived in the same areas for generations, it is likely they belonged to the same religion, and tracing their lineage back to its origins may be easily done from church records, or from interviewing relatives. Students can also discover where their culture influenced American culture; for example, comparing and contrasting how black and white artists depict culture, tradition and history; and doing the same for graffiti. In teaching about the Renaissance of the 12th Century, a cultural comparison might feature the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, examining the similarities and differences of these cultural movements. Black literature and authors can be used for reading materials, such as Maya Angelou, and white literature that depict black culture: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Edgar Allen Poe. In Delpit's article, she describes a teacher who used rap to develop student skill at translating the figurative speech in Shakespeare (1988). Sports can be used as examples of dedication, or discipline, even as a social issue; for example, with the coming together of races through sports, such as the work of Jackie Johnson, who revolutionized black and white relations by becoming a hero, and celebrity for the wider American culture. Sports were, in many ways, the first area where there was a feeling of equality and fellowship both on the field and in the audience. In studying popular culture, TV shows such as the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* or the latest movies can be used to determine if the cultures portrayed truly reflects reality. Questions such as: 'What are movies and media trying to persuade us to believe?' could help develop awareness of the differences between popular perception and reality, and provide a forum where students can examine black and white culture. The media are important ways for students to learn the codes and rules of culture. By exploring their perspectives, their culture, and placing these in the context of the target culture, students have a point of entry into the school culture.

Bridging the Dialect and Cultural Divide

In 1977, Gary and Charlesetta Simpkins, and a prominent educator for the Chicago black community, Grace Holt, designed The BRIDGE program; a contrastive analysis reading curriculum based on using BE as a transitional tool to assist in gaining control of SE, by teaching children in their familiar linguistic code. This curriculum was seen as a way for students to intentionally decode SE, and help develop code switching strategies. (Richard and Sweetland, 2004, p. 173). It formed a language bridge between BE and SE, and consisted of a series of three graded dialect readers that proceed through BE, transition English, to SE. It was based on the theory that BE children are wholly competent readers in their own dialect, which was first noted by William A Stewart, a Georgetown University professor, in 1965. While Stewart was working on a Christmas card greeting with a dialect version of *Twas the Night Before Christmas,* he had what he termed, a "fortuitous experience", when one of his students, who was normally a problem reader, began reading the following aloud.

> *It's the night before Christmas, and here in our house,*
>
> *It ain't nothing moving, not even no mouse.*
>
> *There go we-all stockings, hanging high up off the floor,*
>
> *So Santa Claus can full them up, if he walk in through our door.*

John and Angela Rickford (1995), linguists with Stanford University, succinctly summarized Stewart's response as follows:

> Stewart noted that "her voice was steady, her word reading accurate, and her
>
> sentence intonation . . . natural." However, when he asked her to read the original SE
>
> version for comparison, "all the 'problem reader' behaviors returned." Stewart argued
>
> that "this unplanned experiment (later duplicated with other inner-city children)
>
> suggested an entirely different dimension of possible reading problems" for inner
>
> city African American children . . . that of structural interference between their

native AAVE and the SE which they are invariably given to read. And, as he asked

rhetorically if it has been considered pedagogically useful to adapt beginning

reading materials to the word pronunciations of middle-class white children (as has

been done in i.t.a. and phonics), then might it not also be useful to adapt beginning

reading materials to the sentence patterns of lower-class [African American]

children? (Rickford & Rickford, 1995, p.111).

The theoretical interest this program generated along with the success in using dialect readers

in Sweden, led to the development of the *Bridge* program, which presented reading material

in both BE and SE. The content used was based on the experiences of black children. Here is

a small sample that readers would be given to introduce the program:

When you was jus' startin' in school, readin' got on your case, now didn't it, got down on

you, hurt your feelings . . . And you said to yourself, I ain' gon' be messin' with this ol'bad

boy no more! (Labov, 1995, p. 8)

This program starts at the student's level, both emotionally and academically, and

then focuses on specific language elements to form a 'bridge' between the dialects. The

language elements specific to BE -and different from SE- were illuminated by using a

grammar and expression format key:

- *italics* represent BE idioms and slang,

- [0] represents deletion of the verb be /to be/ and deletion of auxiliaries,

- **bolded** text represents grammatical features which directly contrast with SE.

The text also included a sequential with line direct translation to SE:

BE: What you [0] gonna learn.

SE: What you will learn

BE: To *dig* on talk that [0] saying more than **what** the words really mean.

SE: To understand language that means more than the words themselves.

BE: *Check this out*

SE: Study the explanation

(Labov, 1995, p.9)

The program is designed to ensure comprehension, and then directly contrast the differences between the dialects, with a focus on the SE grammatical features not present in, or different from, BE. Maximizing comprehension, and a sense of reading fluency, from the very start gives students a chance to develop a positive relationship with reading. By gradually transitioning to SE, with focused instruction on specific language elements that cause difficulty, students will make the transition to SE while maintaining fluency and comprehension.

In 1981, a four-month, controlled study of the *Bridge* program, that involved 540 children in 27 different schools throughout the US, noted a 6.2-month reading gain in the group (417 students) being taught with the *Bridge* program, and a 1.6-reading gain in the control group (123 students) being taught by conventional methods. However, despite the success demonstrated, the program was discontinued due to the negative reaction from *both* the black and white communities, concerning the use of BE in the classroom (Rickford, p. 10). Delpit (1988) documented a typical response, by the black community, to dialect readers as follows:

> They were seen as a plot to prevent the schools from teaching the linguistic aspects of culture of power, thus dooming Black children to a permanent outsider caste. As one parent demanded: "My kids know how to be Black –you all teach them how to be successful in the White man's world." (p.285)

Within the white community there has been equal opposition to using dialect readers because it is seen as endorsing "bad English." Even if the linguistic misunderstandings about dialect readers could be put to rest, the notion that a classroom being used as a place where cultures

can come together in harmony, would not last long. The issue of language in the classroom is really only a small cog in the political, social and economic machinery that drives education. Is it fair to deny students the right to an equitable education? Most would say "no" –but collectively there is a resounding "yes".

The Politics of Dialect Curriculum

Despite the resistance, efforts towards a bi-dialectic curriculum continued to be pursued, and in 1996, the Oakland School Board passed a resolution to recognize "Ebonics" (African-American Vernacular English) as a language, in order to pursue the use of BE in the classroom as a springboard to SE. In 1997, the Oakland resolution was championed by the Linguistic Society of America who published the *LSA Resolution on the Oakland "Ebonics" Issue*. In this resolution they affirmed, along with many other issues concerning BE, that: "the "Oakland School Board's decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching them SE is linguistically and pedagogically sound" (Linguistic Society of America, 1997, para 13). The recommendation that resulted was an allocation of bilingual funds for the education of BE children:

> African-American pupils are equally entitled to be tested and, where appropriate,
>
> shall be provided general funds and State and Federal (Title VIII) bilingual
>
> education and ESL programs to specifically address their LEP/NEP needs.
>
> (LINGUIST, n.d.)

Now the issue of BE in the classroom had become a political issue.

The Clinton administration fully expressed the opinions of the majority when it stated that "elevating Black English to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students" (Rickford, 2000, p. 6). Even leaders, as Jesse Jackson, stated that the Ebonics decision was "an unacceptable surrender, border lining

on disgrace," although he later reversed his opinion (p.5). This occasion provided many

forums for people to express their opinion about BE and an American online poll documented

comments; such as, "disgusting black street slang," lazy English" bastardized English, the

language of illiteracy and this utmost ridiculous made-up language" (p.6).

The bi-dialectic approach was not well understood or remotely acceptable by the majority.

California quietly rocks

   Some progress has been made in incorporating dialect curriculum; for example, in

California through California's Standard English Proficiency (SEP) Program, an approach

based on contrastive analysis, created specifically for Black students, is supported in three

hundred California school districts (Smitherman, 2004, p.190). However statistics that

support its implementation are not available, because there is not a clear or stated directive to

implement this program. Below is a summary statement from the California Department of

Education on this matter.

> There is also general agreement that the goal for African American students
>
> should be additive, not subtractive: that is, learning standard academic English,
>
> without a focus on eliminating AAVE.
>
> Because AAVE is a language system with well-formed rules for sounds,
>
> grammar and meanings, children whose speech follow these rules will be
>
> helped to learn standard academic English if they receive special practice at
>
> just those points where their language differs from the standard.. . (California,
>
> 2008, p.1)
>
> . . .[I]t is generally accepted that AAVE is the rule-governed system described here. If
>
> appropriate methods are used in the classroom, children who speak this variety can
>
> achieve the goal of mastering standard academic English. Such instruction will be all

the more effective if it identifies non-standard varieties as different, rather than

inferior. All students (regardless of linguistic, social, and economic background)

should be taught standard academic English in a way that respects the richness,

legitimacy, and vitality of their home language. (California, 2008, p. 7)

However, a policy for Black education is not a Federal mandate, and language education

remains in the hands of local politicians and local schools. This means that each school must

revisit the debate and controversy, whenever there is public opposition to the inclusion of a

dialect based curriculum (Smitherman, 2004, pp.187).

While there is a shift away from a remedial approach, to an education curriculum that

is more closely aligned with a bi-dialectic curriculum that addresses the differences between

the school and home dialect, public opposition continues to stall the full application of an

educational policy that recognizes bi-dialecticism.

DIALECT EQUALITY

One important aspect of language that is not understood, by members of the public who oppose dialectic programs for black students, is that all languages and dialects have equal status. They are all created and shaped and cultivated by groups of people, and therefore represent a human feat that cannot be attributed to one inventor or one elite group. Clearly there are people who may have greater or lesser degrees of intelligence or talent within a community, but an individual's language is a reflection of the community and not just the individual. Until it is proven that one community, race or nation is, in all aspects, superior (or indeed inferior), then the numerous languages or dialects used are all of equal linguistic standing. "'The linguistics' axiom' (that) all languages are equal', is not a lens through which BE is viewed by mainstream America, and thus from an applied linguistic stance, understanding the belief systems of those empowered to make political decisions (in this case BE educational policies), cannot be ignored (Wassink, Curzan, 2004, p.174). Such is the socio-political arena that linguists work in, despite the fact that BE is a dialect that has been the focus of linguistic study revealing an underlying pragmatic and linguistic competence in its grammar and lexicon -a dialect that reflects their culture and heritage, their understanding of themselves and the world around them. It is this linguistic and cultural knowledge of BE that has been transformed into solutions to solve the literacy/educational problems experienced by the black community.

Boundaries and Borders: More Than Just Lines on a Map

      John U. Ogbu (1999), a University of California, professor with their Department of Anthropology, developed a theory that the black community copes, with the systemic discrimination, by maintaining solidarity through culture boundaries that are in opposition to mainstream America. BE is one strategy in maintaining this boundary, but the black community recognizes that acquiring SE is necessary in obtaining economic and political empowerment and status in America. The community also understands that the two dialects can co-exist, and it is desired. There is a perception in the Black community of a "division of labour in dialect socialization" (Ogbu, 1999, p.166). School and mainstream society are where children are expected to "talk white," but it is not tolerated in the community or at home. For the black community, SE is seen as being valuable only insofar as it is a means to acquiring economic and political entitlement. Ogbu (1999) postulated that within the community however "talking white" is viewed as a threat to their identity and as resulting in "racelessness"'. However, this has not proven to be true. It has been shown that successful black university students do not disengage from their black identity or language. Numerous studies have shown that black Americans who have succeeded academically, have a deeper sense of racial solidarity, and see their success as equivalent to the success of their race. In a 2003, study conducted by Smith and Lalonde, it was found that the majority of successful black university women were invested in the social justice of their race, and maintaining connections to their community were essential to them. "Racelessness" does not appear to be advantageous in terms of academic success (Smith & Lalonde, 2003).

It Takes Two to Tango

The issue of how to overcome the linguistic interference in early education has been stalled by a lack of understanding both within the black community and the white community. Within the black community the same logic used to oppose using SE (talking white) within the community is seen in their resistance to incorporate their BE (learning slang) in school curriculum. In the white community, there has been equal opposition to using BE as a starting point in literacy development, because it is seen as endorsing "bad English." At the core of this educational debate there is not only a linguistic misunderstanding on both sides, but also a systemic form of racism through which the black culture is devalued.

LINGUISTIC SOLUTIONS

While it is not within the domain of linguists to "expunge racism" it is within their grasp to provide linguistic solutions (Wassink and Curzan, 2004, p.178). From a linguistic point of view, the ideal would be recognition that dialects are valid and not improper or corrupted use of English. The goal is to foster a perception in which bi-dialecticism is viewed as a skill similar to being bilingual or multilingual. The notion that becoming bi-dialectic is an additive skill is one that linguists have been trying to impress upon both the black and white communities (Rickford, 2004, p.234). However, since language is a social construct that signifies our membership with a specific group (or in the case of the black community, also opposition to a dominant group), overcoming the educational deficits caused by BE requires a coming to terms with the racial issues that has placed the black community in the "outer circle" of North American society (Wassink and Curzan, 2004).

Within the disciplines of linguistics, psychology, sociology and education there has been a focused effort to provide accessible information to inform both professionals, involved in creating educational policy, and the general public about bi-dialecticism and bilingualism. The effort, to provide a knowledge base that will allow for sound educational and public policy to be made concerning literacy and dialect, is most obvious is the compilation of a *Top-Coded Bibliography* (Rickford, 2004). This annotated bibliography for laypeople, educators and policy makers; consisting of over 650 articles, books and dissertations that address the issue of how knowledge of language variation can be used to inform teaching practices. This compilation of research is a rich resource from which language policy makers, teachers and the public can make educational choices about BE, based on knowledge gained through linguistic and relevant research.

CONCLUSION

Currently I am teaching students who come from a variety of cultures and experiences. And the greatest success I have had comes when I am able to bring some knowledge of my students' culture and language to the classroom, such as: linguistic knowledge of their L1 word order, or specific phonological differences; or cultural knowledge –*what is important to them, what are their experiences, perceptions, feelings about living in Canada.* The knowledge I bring allows me to focus on language areas that cause the greatest difficulty, and I am able to engage my students by exploring both language and cultural issues that are meaningful to them. I believe that I am giving them the necessary skills and confidence to be able to express, debate and communicate their ideas -to give them the language tools so they can create their own identity. The education system in the US has not been successful in giving a voice to black American students. The lack of understanding of the differences between the language and culture among black and white students, has resulted in an economic, political and social barrier that keeps the black community firmly placed in the outer circle of America. The goal of schools is to give students the skills to fully participate in mainstream America, so they can pursue opportunities in whatever they choose. Instead what has happened and continues to happen, is that black students leave school with few choices. They are not equipped to participate in mainstream America, because they do not have the cultural knowledge or language skills that would enable them to move beyond their community boundaries. Working to meet the needs of all students in a classroom can be a challenge, but an even greater one is working in a classroom that has become a cultural battlefield. This doesn't have to happen, and there are many instances where teachers who, inspired by the diversity of their students, use methods and techniques that create classrooms where cultural differences are celebrated and shared. Black students, immigrant students or ESL students, do not come to school to subvert their culture, but to gain knowledge about

another culture. Where multilingual and multicultural societies intersect, there needs to be an

emphasis on methods and practices that nurture a multilingual and multicultural identity.

Appendix A –Alabama Literacy Test for Voters

"In Part "A" of a typical Alabama literacy test, the applicant was given a selection of the

Constitution to read aloud. The registrar could assign a long complex section filled with

legalese and convoluted sentences, or he could select a simple one or two sentence section.

For example, a white applicant might be given:

SECTION 20: That no person shall be imprisoned for debt.

While a Black applicant might be given:

SECTION 260: The income arising from the sixteenth section trust fund, the surplus

revenue fund, until it is called for by the United States government, and the funds

enumerated in sections 257 and 258 of this Constitution, together with a special annual

tax of thirty cents on each one hundred dollars of taxable property in this state, which

the legislature shall levy, shall be applied to the support and maintenance of the public

schools, and it shall be the duty of the legislature to increase the public school fund from

time to time as the necessity therefore and the condition of the treasury and the

resources of the state may justify; provided, that nothing herein contained shall be so

construed as to authorize the legislature to levy in any one year a greater rate of state

taxation for all purposes, including schools, than sixty-five cents on each one hundred

dollars' worth of taxable property; and provided further, that nothing herein contained

shall prevent the legislature from first providing for the payment of the bonded

indebtedness of the state and interest thereon out of all the revenue of the state.

The Registrar marked each word that in his opinion you mispronounced. In some counties,

you had to orally interpret the section to the registrar's satisfaction. You then had to either

copy out by hand a section of the Constitution, or write it down from dictation as the registrar

spoke (mumbled) it. White applicants usually were allowed to copy, Black applicants usually

had to take dictation. The Registrar then judged whether you were "literate" or "illiterate."

His judgement was final and could not be appealed.

After that, you were given Parts "B" and "C" which were two sets of four written questions

that you had to answer."

(Civil Rights Movement Veterans, 2006)

Appendix B: Brown vs. Board of Education

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren reads the decision of the unanimous Court:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. (National Archives)

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