

The Language of Power: Beyond the Grammar Workbook

The author describes an eighth-grade language unit that helps students understand the value of dialects and standardized English.

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You're speaking the language of power or whatever! I never heard you talk like that before.

—Ana, a student in Mr. Ramsey's eighth-grade English class

In her comment above, Ana expressed her surprise at the speech of her principal, Mr. Johnson, after hearing him in a meeting with her teachers. Ana had been studying dialects and grammar as a part of a Language of Power unit created and taught by Mr. Ramsey. While Mr. Johnson's staff was surely familiar with his use of Standard English, Ana was used to chatting with the principal in the hallway, using an informal, conversational tone peppered with slang and jokes. In her surprised comment—and the conversation that followed—Ana showed how she, like many of Mr. Ramsey's students, was coming to understand the concept of code-switching and the importance of audience in determining one's speech, important lessons for students to learn when studying our English language.

The National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) has given us some thought-provoking questions to consider as we integrate language instruction into the English curriculum. ATEG identifies a number of goals, which are articulated in *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*, a helpful text by Brock Haussamen, Amy Benjamin, Martha Kolln, and Rebecca S. Wheeler. Goal A states that "Every student, from every background, will complete school with the ability to communicate comfortably and effectively in both spoken and written Standard English, with awareness of when use of Standard English is appropriate" (Haussamen

et al. 4).¹ Goal C urges us to ensure that "Every student will complete school with an understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural variation that occurs in language across time, social situation, and social group. While recognizing the need for mastering Standard English, students will also demonstrate an understanding of the equality in the expressive capacity and linguistic structure among a range of language varieties both vernacular and standard, as well as an understanding of language-based prejudice" (4). These two goals were achieved by many of Mr. Ramsey's eighth-grade students.

Studying Mr. Ramsey's Class

I studied Mr. Ramsey's classroom as a part of a qualitative research project on discussions of race and culture that occurred in the eighth-grade curriculum at a public middle school in the Midwest. I spent an average of three days per week at the school from October 2007 until June 2008. The school's population is 60–65% white; most of the students of color are African American. The school is quite diverse economically. Because it has an arts magnet focus as well as a strong reputation in the community, it draws families both from the suburban area where it is located as well as the urban center that it borders. Mr. Ramsey was in his second year of teaching at the time of the study. In this article, I discuss a unit that incorporated explicit instruction about how language can be used and viewed in multiple

ways, with the goal of teaching the “language of power”—formal, so-called Standard English—as a tool for achieving school success.

One of the reasons I chose to study Mr. Ramsey and his students was the school’s focus on issues of race and culture. In an interview I conducted with Mr. Ramsey, he noted that discussing the “language of power” was a way into issues of racism and privilege. He attributed some of the achievement gap that plagues American schools to the mismatch between students’ home languages and the language expected in the classroom. As a result, he valued grammar instruction that taught the rules and patterns of Standard English in a way that did not devalue or belittle the languages students brought from their homes and communities.

The Language of Power Unit

Mr. Ramsey identified three main goals for the “language of power” unit. First, he wanted to help students understand “how language is culturally constructed.” Next, he wanted to emphasize that the issue is one of access, not correctness; he did not want to present Standard English as the one pure way we should write and speak. Rather, he sought to show students how knowledge and understanding of this language variety would give them a tool that could help open doors in academia and some professional settings. Finally, he wanted to make explicit that those in power, not the inherent value of a language variety, help determine “correctness.” Standard English is not the language commonly used in school because it is “best” of all American English language varieties.

Some of Mr. Ramsey’s thoughts and objectives are inspired by the work of Lisa Delpit. Delpit explains how, for many students of color, it is difficult to navigate the terrain of school, based as it is in white, middle-class values and practices, including a dialect close to Standard English in speaking and writing. In her groundbreaking work *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Delpit finds fault with “progressive” pedagogy, such as writers’ and readers’ workshops. She argues that the needs of students of color are not met with such student-centered, choice-based teaching; instead, those whose cultural practices may not match those valued in schools need to be explicitly taught the

FIGURE 1. *The Culture of Power* (from Delpit’s *Other People’s Children*)

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (24)

rules and norms of the culture of power—not in hopes of assimilation and indoctrination, but to allow students to understand what is expected of them so that they can succeed within a flawed system. (For a list of Delpit’s main tenets regarding the culture of power, see fig. 1.) Many of these ideas guided Mr. Ramsey’s Language of Power unit.

Mr. Ramsey began the unit by explaining what he meant by “language of power.” Equating it with Standard English, he described it as the language students would use on a college or high school application. As eighth graders, some of his students were applying to charter or private high schools, and the vast majority expected to attend college. For the first instructional activity, students brainstormed a list of dialects (see fig. 2). Students discussed how people in different areas of the country speak differently; for example, Tyler explained how his cousins in Texas had a southern drawl. Students also noted that there are slang and other speech patterns that are unique to the racial or ethnic

FIGURE 2. List of Brainstormed Dialects

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| ___ Texas | ___ Police |
| ___ Child/parent | ___ Romantic/flirting |
| ___ Dinner table | ___ Professional |
| ___ Friends | ___ Auctions |
| ___ Home | ___ Church |
| ___ Family | ___ Indoor/outdoor |
| ___ School | ___ Baby-Puppy-Kitty |
| • Teachers | ___ Dance |
| • Friends | ___ Music |
| ___ Texting | ___ Elders |
| ___ Sports | ___ Race/culture |
| ___ Military | |

backgrounds of the speakers. Finally, students said that to whom they were speaking—parents, friends, teachers—also determined the type of language they used. (An amusing example of this idea from their list is “Baby-Puppy-Kitty”: something like “Awww . . . wook at da cute wittwe guy!”)

To supplement these classroom activities, students read Gary Soto’s *Novio Boy*. This short play tells the tale of a Mexican American boy going on a first date, and it allowed Mr. Ramsey to use literature to examine language issues, as the characters sometimes speak English, sometimes Spanish, and sometimes a combination of the two. Using a play was particularly appropriate, as students read the characters’ speech aloud. Mr. Ramsey had the class stop and discuss not only how the protagonist Rudy and his friends and family were speaking but also how the students in the class gave voice to the characters in their dramatic reading.

Students produced a number of texts themselves over the course of the Language of Power unit. They wrote a monologue in a dialect and then created a list of rules and guidelines for the dialect they chose (directions for the assignment appear in fig. 3). Next, they switched rule sheets with a partner and changed their own monologue using their classmate’s guidelines, rewriting the speech in another dialect. When students struggled with this task, Mr. Ramsey explained, “Part of what I want you to see is that it’s hard to write on one page the rules for a dialect.” Students also produced a language autobiography: an essay describing the language varieties they spoke and how they came to know them. In addition, they wrote a “translation” of a college admissions essay into a dialect “as far away from the language of power as possible.” Mr. Ramsey explained that students were usually engaged in the

FIGURE 3. Guidelines for the Dialect Instruction Sheet

1. What are the basics of the language? Are the sentences long or short? Is it emotional or not? Is it quiet, loud, aggressive, passive?
2. What kinds of words are used? Create a mini-dictionary if needed.
3. How formal or informal is the language?
4. What special rules for grammar or spelling are there? Is it mostly spoken or written?
5. Give one example of a sentence written in this language.

task of interpreting in the other direction: “You already translate in your writing: for example, you take out ums and ahs when you write. For this writing, keep them in.” Through these assignments, students practiced varying their language according to audience, trying on different voices and dialects.

For one of the unit’s major projects, students worked in small groups to create a skit that had to incorporate three language varieties, including Standard English. The students chose partners to work with and developed scenarios in which people who spoke different dialects might come together. One group performed a newscast with various types of stories (entertainment, sports, interviews); another portrayed strangers stuck in an elevator. A third told the story of a plane crashing on a desert island. Students wrote, rehearsed, and performed these skits in front of the whole class. After each, Mr. Ramsey led the class through a debriefing of what the performance showed about language.

Other strategies included additional oral as well as written work. Mr. Ramsey came up with the Like/Uh/Um Battle as a fun, educational activity after several days of standardized testing. For this contest, students were given a topic to discuss and competed against one another to see who could talk the longest without filler words such as *like*, *uh*, and *um*. Mr. Ramsey said that some of these words were part of their generational language: “We’re playing with how much the teenage dialect is hardwired into your brain.” Finally, students also completed exercises in a grammar workbook. While this activity is a traditional one, Mr. Ramsey worked to explain it in terms of the unit’s focus. When students completed an exercise in which they had to choose the correct form of a pronoun, he commented, “Pronouns are a marker of the language of power—mistakes with them stick out. I see a lot of mistakes with them in your writing.” He identified the use of the formally accepted pronoun case as an

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important feature of Standard English, one that they needed to be familiar with.

Measuring Success

In what ways was Mr. Ramsey’s Language of Power unit successful? First, these discussions about language and power were productive ones. Many students demonstrated an understanding in their classroom comments that audience determines dialect. Ana showed her understanding of code-switching when she remarked on Mr. Johnson’s professional language. In addition, both the students and the teacher made explicit connections between issues of language and power and ideas about ethnocentrism and culture, which they were examining in Social Studies class. They were able to talk about how one culture is not inherently “right,” how our value judgments are determined by our time, place, and upbringing. Such cross-curricular connections enhanced student learning and facilitated discussions of racism and privilege later in the year. Understanding how Standard English is just one of many potential language varieties was important. Yet at the same time, Mr. Ramsey helped students learn the conventions of Standard English, giving them the skills they needed to navigate academia. As Delpit advocates, “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (24).

There were also parts of the unit that were not as successful. One of the major assessments, the dialect skit, revealed some difficulties. The performances were uneven: some students showed mastery of the dialects presented; others did not. While many students’ comments indicated that they grasped the importance of audience, not all of the projects demonstrated this understanding. Also problematic was

the students’—and occasionally Mr. Ramsey’s—association of Standard English with terms such as *proper*, *snooty*, and *big words*. While some of those connotations may be justified, Standard English is more than mere snobbery. Finally, students’ long-term retention of these ideas is unknown. When students were surveyed in June about their most meaningful learning experiences, only three students out of 31 identified this unit as especially important. Nevertheless, it is true that subsequent discussions that occurred in English and Social Studies built on some of the knowledge that students gained through studying the “language of power.”

My teaching experience shows—and research confirms—that relying only on grammar workbook exercises is not an effective way to teach students about the English language. I hope that the work of Mr. Ramsey and his students inspires readers to consider how they might work to teach Standard English as well as the other diverse language varieties that we encounter in our classrooms and the world at large.

The “language of power”—when to use it, as well as its limitations—is indeed a necessary and rich subject of study in our English classes. 

Note

1. For a more thorough discussion on the terminology related to Standard English, see pages 3–5 of *Grammar Alive!* As Haussamen et al. point out, this language variety is “standard not in the sense that it is better English than other varieties but in the sense that it is the widely recognized and codified version of English” (4).

Works Cited

- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press, 1995. Print.
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- Soto, Gary. *Novio Boy*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1997. Print.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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In “Exploring Language and Identity: Amy Tan’s ‘Mother Tongue’ and Beyond,” students brainstorm the different languages they use in speaking and writing and when and where these languages are appropriate. They write in their journals about a time when someone made an assumption about them based on their use of language, share their writing with the class, and apply their experiences to readings of “Mother Tongue.” Finally, students write a literacy narrative describing two different languages they use and when and where they use them. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-language-identity-mother-910.html>