

# De-centering English: Highlighting the Dynamic Nature of the English Language to Promote the Teaching of Code-Switching

*White describes classroom activities that help de-center students' views of English as a static discursive norm and demonstrate the inherent power in different forms of "English."*

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hen students enter *my* English class, they should leave their 'cultural hats' at the door. In my classes, I'm going to require that students speak and use *proper* English. Period." This was the reaction of one of my English language arts methods students while we were discussing the role of students' native and culturally imbued discursive practices in schools (in other words, high school students' liberal use of Ebonics/African American Vernacular English and popular-culture-induced slang). Her views were far from unique. Nods of agreement showed that this opinion was shared by many of her peers. My lesson on making use of the dynamic nature of English and the many forms it takes across and within cultures certainly wasn't going as planned.

My lesson goal had been to get the students to see that though we should teach the conventions of Standard English, we should also acknowledge and even celebrate the unique and highly effective forms of discourse that students bring with them into the classroom. I was proposing that not only does a broader view of what counts as appropriate classroom discourse promote an inclusive English classroom, it creates a culturally responsive and inclusive foundation from which to teach students code-switching to Standard English, the use of which is an essential part of what Lisa Delpit has called the "codes of power." We can, I argued, use students' native "ways with words" (Heath) as starting points from which to teach them how to use Standard English. Instead of viewing our K-12

students' respective language usage as deficits that we should squelch, we could value these unique discursive forms, use them for code-switching purposes, and thus better induce students to add Standard English "to their existing [language] repertoire" (Kutz 85).

However, my students (and many other pre-service teachers), who were only weeks away from their student teaching semester, had a narrow—and I posit an ethnocentric—view of what counts as appropriate language practices in the classroom. They saw "English" as a rigidly defined set of unchanging norms and their role as English teachers to be language police. Their views mirrored both the hyperbolic rhetoric of opponents to Oakland's infamous attempt to acknowledge "Black Vernacular English" in schools in the 1990s (see Gayles and Denerville) and, more recently, proponents of Arizona's new controversial immigration laws. More importantly, my students held views that could, when put into classroom practice, silence and alienate the students whom they most need to engage in their English classes: those who speak non-Standard English dialects.

These fears prompted me to attempt something to "de-center" my students' sense of English and, in so doing, to highlight the inherent value in numerous forms of English communication. I created—and have subsequently employed in my methods classes—what seem to be effective means of de-centering students' views of English as a static discursive norm and code-switching activities that demonstrate the inherent power in different forms of

“English.” Below I present these lessons and briefly discuss their impact on my students’ thinking.

### English Teachers as English Police: Language as Static

In my English language arts methods class, one pre-service teacher said that a primary part of teaching English is to teach the “rules” of the English language and to enforce those rules so that future students would learn that English rules stay the same and that people need to follow them “to be successful in our country.” (The use of “our country” is telling; it suggests a cultural/linguistic norm based on white, Western linguistic codes of power.) Though this preservice teacher was no doubt well-intentioned, the attitude expressed does not correspond with more contemporary views of language and literacy. This view ignores the fact that language is socially mediated; we use and re-create language to meet our social and cultural needs (Fairclough; Gee; Lave and Wenger; Street; Wertsch). Correspondingly, as cultures change, languages change. Thus, our lexicon is always growing and changing; we add new words constantly while words whose contexts are no longer valid die a quiet death. For example, at the same time terms such as *voice mail*, *digitize*, and *microwave* have become common, words such as *ice-box* and *forsooth* and even *motorcar* have largely disappeared from the English lexicon. A language with by far the largest number of words of any language, English is constantly changing and adapting to the needs of our society. This student’s views also ignore research that suggests that simply discounting or ignoring the power of students’ culturally imbued discursive styles in the classroom setting silences them and pushes them further away from the English curricula we are trying to teach (White, 2007, “Resistance,” “Sociolinguistic”).

To emphasize the ever-changing nature of English, my students engage in an activity in which they read, interpret, and then answer questions about two canonical pieces of English literature: *Beowulf* and *Canterbury Tales* (see fig. 1). The questions associated with these two texts are similar to those that high school students might encounter when reading texts in their own English classrooms (answering questions about the plot, character, themes, inferred meanings, and specific questions about details designed to require close textual reading).

Seldom are students—individually, in groups, or as a whole class—able to make much sense of the first text or answer the corresponding questions (though some use the obvious context clue “Beowulf” in the text and remember reading translated versions of the text in high school classes). Most often, students simply give up on trying to answer the *Beowulf* questions. They shrug their shoulders or look away in response to my questions. When they do respond to my repeated inquiries, they often claim that the text is “impossible” because it is, as a student said, “not in English.”

These same students have mixed success with answering the *Canterbury Tales* questions. College English majors and minors (who make up my course) tend to be more familiar with this canonical text (usually from modern English translations) and thus have more prior knowledge upon which to build. They are also generally able to interpret the Middle English sufficiently to answer these relatively simple questions. Nonetheless, there is a high degree of variance in students’ ability to answer these questions and the levels of frustration they have in so doing. Such variance speaks again to prior knowledge and to their familiarity with the language used within the text. Their ability to engage with the text is highly dependent on their ability to code-switch between the Standard English of today and the English of 600 years ago.

More importantly for the purposes of this assignment, my students must then try to recite the original pieces as accurately as possible. Reciting *Beowulf* aloud and with accuracy (to Old English norms) is almost impossible. Thus, most students simply give up or make up pronunciations. However, it is possible to recite *Canterbury Tales* if one has knowledge of the oral language conventions of Middle English (something most undergraduate students do not possess). When student volunteers recite this passage, I frequently stop their reading to correct their pronunciations and emphasize their English language “deficits” (note the phonetic version of the passage in fig. 1). My intent with this

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**FIGURE 1.** Questions on Two Canonical Pieces of English Literature
 

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*Beowulf*

(Old English, 750–1000 AD)

1. HWÆT, WE GAR-DEna in geardagum,
2. þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
3. hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!
4. oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
5. monegum mægþum meodosetlaofteah,
6. egsode eorlas, syððanærest wearð
7. feasceaft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,
8. weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
9. oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
10. ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
11. gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!
12. Ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned
13. geong in geardum, þone God sende
14. folce to frofre; fyrenðearfe ongeat,
15. þe hie ær drugon aldorleas
16. lange hwile; him þæs Liffrea,
17. wuldres Wealdend woroldare forgeaf,
18. Beowulf wæs breme—blæd wide sprang—
19. Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.
20. Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
21. fromum feohgiftumon fæder bearne,

## Text Questions

1. Who is the main protagonist of the story?
2. From whom does the protagonist come?
3. In what kingdom does the story take place?
4. What is the role of orphans in the story?
5. Why was the king so respected?

*Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer

(Middle English, late 14th century)

1. Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
2. The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
3. And bathed every veyne in swich licour
4. Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
5. Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
6. Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
6. Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
8. Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
9. And smale foweles maken melodye,
10. That slepen al the nyght with open ye
11. (so priketh hem nature in hir corages);
12. Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages

*Canterbury Tales*, Phonetic Version

1. Whan that Avril with his shoorez sote-eh
2. The druughth of March hath persèd toe the rote-eh,
3. And baathèd every vein in switch licoor
4. Of which vertúe engendrèd is the flure,
5. Whan Zephirus ache with his swayt-eh braith,
6. Inspeerèd hath in every holt and haith
7. The tender cropez, and the yung-eh sun-eh
8. Hath in the Ram his hal-f coorse y-run-eh,
9. And smaaleh foolez maaken melody-eh
10. That slaipen al the nicked with awpen ee-eh
11. So pricketh hem Nat-yóor in hir cooráhjez—
12. Than longen fol-k to gawn on pilgrimahjez

(Murphy, vii)

## Text Questions

1. What is the season and why is this important to the story?
  2. Who is Zephirus and why is this important to the story?
  3. What do people wish to do in this season?
  4. What is the rhyme scheme of the passage?
  5. What is the tone of the passage (examples)?
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part of the activity is to act as the Middle English police, insisting that each reader speak in the “standard” form. While correcting students’ many flawed pronunciations, I remind them—generally in a lighthearted manner—that *Canterbury Tales* was written in relatively standard English and is part of the traditional curricular canon (things with which they should be intimately familiar).

Students who are native English speakers and who tend to hold a static view of English can see—and more importantly experience—how English is an ever-changing language and they can feel, albeit in a nonthreatening way, linguistic alienation within the English classroom. In short, the activities

and readings demonstrate that English itself changes per the needs and uses of those who use it and that familiarity and practice with discursive styles affects one’s ability to understand and use it.

### Tupac: Lost in Translation

Most college-aged students have some understanding of the concept of “lost in translation.” Frequently, they equate the term with differences in world languages, such as the confusion that results when non-English speakers encounter idioms in English. Students who have significant experience studying a foreign language or who grew up speak-

ing a language other than English tend to grasp the concept even more fully; they can describe how concepts or words in one language do not correspond with specific English counterparts (Spanish speakers can certainly understand why the Chevy *Nova* had to be renamed to sell in Spanish-speaking nations). However, few students tend to see the idea of “lost in translation” as it occurs *within a language*. They generally fail to see the dynamic nature of dialects and discourses within modern American English and how such dialects are uniquely positioned to express ideas and feelings (and conversely, how the power of ideas can be lost in translation when expressed in a standard form of English). To highlight the power inherent in specific non-Standard English discursive forms, I have my students translate a pop-culture-based passage into “Standard English.” The students take a section of Tupac Shakur’s “Just Me Against the World” and create their own translation; Figure 2 is a class sample.

Once students have completed the activity we share our translations, examine respective versions of the passage, and discuss (or vote on) which one holds the most power to move the audience. Though each passage—the original and its translation—says the same thing (each has the same literal message), the original, non-Standard English passage inevitably holds far more emotional and rhetorical power regardless of audience. Shakur’s original version speaks loudest both to its intended audience (young, urban youth) as well as to the predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class white students in my methods courses. When discussing our different translations, students last semester said, “Ours just seems so, so . . .” “White,” chimed in a peer, adding, “It’s like the language he [the professor] would use.” A third student described the translation in the figure as “It’s like, antiseptic, boring.” Via different translations of the same text, my students experienced firsthand how meaning can be lost when we insist on a rigid form of English for making meaning.

To further highlight the effect of culturally imbued language styles on meaning, students are encouraged to do an activity I used while teaching poetry and code-switching to urban high school English students: (1) translate their favorite songs into Standard English; (2) translate more “traditional”

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**FIGURE 2.** Standard English Translation of Tupac Shakur’s *Just Me Against the World* (Classroom Sample)

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Can you understand what I see as my future?  
 I live in a stressful city; the police keep an eye out for me  
 The housing projects are a violent place, people are being hurt and killed  
 But I can’t leave behind this life,  
 I stay busy making money.  
 The witnessing of murders and seeing dead bodies in abandoned buildings  
 Negatively influences children, causing them to have a skewed view of life  
 They become addicted to the violence and from the sounds of gunfire,  
 A sound they don’t even stop to think about, but will they survive or fall prey to this same violence?  
 Not even aware  
 Maybe death is the only way he’ll understand—but it’s too late  
 Because others are still dying—I’m losing my good friends quickly  
 They’re being buried in cemeteries  
 I worry about this a lot, so much so I can’t see a future  
 I wonder, will I live? I really don’t have anyone who loves me  
 I am headed for danger, I can’t trust people  
 I load my gun when I feel this terrible anger  
 I don’t want to make excuses, because this is my reality  
 Complaining doesn’t do any good; no one notices the problem with our youth unless there’s gunfire  
 I’m all alone in my quest for recognition of the problem.

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and canonical poetry, such as selected works of Emily Dickinson, into hip-hop versions; (3) create a dialogue using a Creole/Cajun lexicon. Through such activities students engage in active code-switching to different discourses and, by doing so, make cultural connections to language usage. Just as importantly, they are forced to attempt using language forms with which they are generally not proficient or comfortable. Such linguistic alienation is, I try to highlight, what many non-Standard English speakers feel in our classrooms.

## Standard English Just Makes the Most Sense: Heidegger on Truth

While describing his feelings about different discourse norms in the classroom, one of the future English teachers said, “Using Standard English is important because, if for nothing else, it makes more sense [than other forms]. It is something that we all can understand.” Figure 3 is meant to complicate the notion that Standard English is inherently more sensible or comprehensible than other forms. The passage itself, from Martin Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*, is written in Standard English. Moreover, it is also a relatively simple text in form: it rates a 10.6 grade level on the Flesch-Kincaid readability measurement. Ironically, interpreting this passage proves exceptionally difficult for virtually all of my students.

Students working on this passage, either in groups or as a whole class, spend inordinate amounts of time trying to decode it to come up with a meaning that makes sense to them. After much struggle and what even they agree is far too much “time on task” with this relatively short passage, they come up with a number of possible definitions. Sometimes they come close to an effective definition (based on professional philosophers’ interpretations). Just as often, their interpretations are far from Heidegger’s intent.

More important, students simply give up on trying to understand the passage. Said one student recently, “It gives me a headache just trying to

figure it out . . . it’s like the author is trying to make the concept impossible to understand *by the way he has written it*” (emphasis added). What this student expressed mirrors what many struggling readers and non-Standard English speaking students say about the texts we use in our high school English classes. Standard English is relative; one’s ability to understand a text—even a text with simple vocabulary and construction—is dependent on one’s linguistic standards. Philosophers understand Heidegger because they have learned to read, speak, and think in specific ways; they have learned to code-switch between everyday discursive practices and those they need for success within their field. Ironically, this student had the right idea; philosophers do sometimes use obtuse language to get readers to wrestle both with the text and with the ideas inherent in them. They know that uses of language have an effect on the meaning one takes from a text (or a discursive event).

### “To Boldly Go” Is Simply Better Than “To Go Boldly”

Many will remember the famous tag line (above) from the opening of the 1960s television series *Star Trek*. Few, however, recognize that teachers and grammar purists for decades decried the use of such split infinitives; they saw such statements as “to boldly go where no man has gone before” as, if not grammatically incorrect, a poor stylistic choice. Some English teachers for years assumed that theirs

FIGURE 3. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Modern English)

Truth is un-truth insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet-uncovered, the un-uncovered, in the sense of concealment. In unconcealedness, as truth, there occurs also the other “un-” of a double restraint or refusal. Truth occurs as such in the opposition of clearing and double-concealing. Truth is the primal conflict in which, always in some particular way, the Open is won within which everything stands and from which everything withholds itself that shows itself and withdraws itself as a being. Whenever and however this conflict breaks out and happens, the opponents, lighting or clearing and concealing, move apart because of it. Thus the Open of the place of conflict is won. The openness of this Open, that is, truth, can be what it is, namely *this* openness, only if and as long as it establishes itself within this Open. Hence there must always be some being in this Open, something that is, in which the openness takes its stand and against its constancy. In taking possession thus of the Open, the openness holds open the Open and sustains it. Setting and taking possession are here everywhere drawn from the Greek sense of *thesis*, which means a setting up in the unconcealed.

—Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (60–61)

Based on this text—written in Standard English at a tenth-grade readability level (Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score: 10.6)—answer the following questions:

1. What is Heidegger’s thesis?
2. Briefly describe how Heidegger describes the nature of truth.
3. Rephrase the first few sentences into your own words.

was the job to protect English grammar from the changes wrought upon it from non-academic influences. They saw common usage as an enemy to good grammar. However, that most people today fail to pay much attention to split infinitives demonstrates the importance of conveying an idea over arcane rules. “To boldly go where no man has gone before” is perfectly clear (though gendered). Ironically, it might be—at least in part—due to its minor deviation in grammatical style (adhering instead to a more commonly used form of English) that this pop-culture catchphrase has so much staying power; it helps hook the average viewer with the greater message of the show.

Though many English teachers, grammarians, and lexicographers (in other words, language purists) may lament the fact, English is an ever-changing and dynamic language. Its norms, though somewhat stable, are also amenable to the changes of the society in which they are used. Our lexicon is always growing to account for the exponential growth in knowledge corresponding with the electronic age. Similarly, we use language for different purposes within a given society. We change the way we use language depending on the context in which we find ourselves (in other words, we consciously and unconsciously code-switch frequently throughout the average day). Because English is a dynamic language, we must reconceptualize our role as English teachers. To fully engage students (split infinitive intended), we should not adhere to an anachronistic and static view of English. Instead, we must acknowledge, accept, and even use different language forms within the classroom to make that classroom dynamic, inclusive, and relevant to students’ lives. 

**John W. White** is assistant professor of English education at the University of North Florida. A former inner-city high school English teacher, his research focuses on sociolinguistics in the ELA classroom (namely the connection of language, identity, and inclusion in the classroom) as well as ways to expand the traditional English curriculum to be more inclusive to diverse populations. Contact him at [j.white@unf.edu](mailto:j.white@unf.edu).

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“An Introduction to *Beowulf*: Language and Poetics” provides an introduction to the language and poetics of the epic poem. Although this lesson assumes students will read *Beowulf* in translation, it introduces students to the poem’s original Old English and explains the relationship between Old, Middle, and Modern English. Students are introduced to the five characters in the Old English alphabet that are no longer used in Modern English. Students translate a short, simple phrase from Old English; listen to a passage from the poem being read in Old English; and study important literary devices. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/introduction-beowulf-language-poetics-813.html>