

TRIP

Theory & Research Into Practice

Code-Switching

Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms



Rebecca S. Wheeler and Rachel Swords

Foreword by John R. Rickford

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4 Code-Switching Succeeds in Teaching Standard English

In this chapter, we show teachers how and why to begin the process of “flipping the switch” from correction to contrast in their classrooms. As broader context for our work with dialect minority students, we situate the conflict between prestige and nonprestige dialects in school within an international arena so that teachers can see that this is not just a U.S. phenomenon—the same issues occur throughout the world. As we respond to help minority dialect speakers learn Standard English, we share research demonstrating that code-switching works, and works better than traditional techniques of teaching Standard English. And you will see that in the United States, in spite of common practice, we’ve long known this to be the case.

Home Speech in the Classroom

Caribbean Students in Canada: Déjà Vu

When Caribbean students from Trinidad or Haiti go to school in Canada, they encounter a thicket of difficulty. The situation eerily parallels the plight of minority students in U.S. schools. A 1980 Toronto Board of Education survey of ninth-grade students, for example, found that Black students made up 7.0 percent of the student population but constituted 28.5 percent of the Basic Level (skills) group and that 31 percent of Black students were in the Learning Center, the Behavioural Program, and the Hearing and Physically Handicapped programs. In contrast, only 13 percent of Toronto’s White children were placed in these programs (Coelho, 1988, p. 131). True to U.S. statistics, while Caribbean students overpopulated the skills and special education classes, only 5 percent of Black students were in the advanced programs (p. 132).

These lamentable statistics are paralleled more than two decades later in the United States. Ogbu, studying African American achievement in the affluent suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, found the very same types of numbers. Even though African American students came from comparably wealthy and educated families and attended the same school, hav-

ing access to the same resources as the White students, they nonetheless filled the basic skills classes and were virtually absent from honors sections (Ogbu, 2003).

Not only do the statistics between Canada and the United States run hand in hand, but so do the teachers' responses to minority dialect students. In Canada, teachers see the Caribbean students as "careless with the language," as suffering "language problems," speaking "sub-Standard," "bad English" (Coelho, 1991, pp. 40–41). The response of Canadian linguists parallels that of linguists in the United States; the Caribbean Student Resource Committee has detailed a program that "will add Standard Canadian English to the language which the students bring to school. The program will not attempt to eradicate the students' first language; rather it will support and validate that language" as teachers build an ILA program around relevant culture, literature, and language (p. 90). Using the basics of contrastive analysis, Canadian educators describe a linguistically informed response to teaching minority dialect students. They recommend introducing one pattern at a time to show students the contrast between Creole and Standard English. With each pattern, Canadian linguists stress, the students need to practice translating from Creole to Canadian English (e.g., students should practice turning *paper make from wood* into the Standard equivalent *paper made from wood*). Only with practice translating from home to school speech will children really learn the school equivalents.

Trinidad and Tobago

We find the same kinds of concerns in West Indian schools. There, too, "language is the key to access to higher levels of education" (Kephart, 1992, p. 69). Kephart describes how minority dialect or language students fare in educational systems "dominated by ME [the English prescribed by the metropolitan power]" (p. 69). When students in Trinidad and Tobago took their standardized exams, they fared even worse than minority students in the United States. The exams used content

set in England . . . [and having] absolutely nothing to do with West Indian language or culture. During the 1960s the pass rate was around 20 to 30 percent. . . . From 1974 through 1978, the pass rate for children in Trinidad and Tobago averaged 22 percent . . . [on] a test on what was supposed to be their native language. (p. 69)

Not only are students' scores familiar, but so are attitudes toward the language varieties of minority students. Yet again, teachers and the public scorn the community language, believing it to be "broken English," "corrupt," and "incapable of expressing complex ideas." In response,

teachers “correct” the students’ “errors” (Nidue, 1992, p. 13). Yet, clearly, given the test scores, correction didn’t help. In response, Caribbean scholars are bringing a linguistically informed approach to the classroom, one that builds on students’ home language as a springboard to mastering regional Standard English. Clearly, in nation after nation, it’s time for a new approach to community language in the school classroom.

How to Talk the New Walk

But if we suggest that you do not use the usual descriptors in talking about student language, what words, terms, or images *do* we suggest you use? Reseeing what’s going on in student language entails, in turn, talking about student language in new ways. Table 4.1 gives you a handhold on new ways of seeing, talking about, and responding to students and student writing.

Table 4.1. New ways for talking about language: from red pen to code-switching.

Correctionist Approach	Code-Switching/Contrastivist Approach
<p>Language as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ proper or improper ■ good or bad 	<p>Language as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ appropriate or inappropriate ■ effective or ineffective <p>in a setting (appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose)</p>
<p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ is right or wrong ■ is correct or incorrect 	<p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ follows a pattern ■ ranges from formal to informal ■ varies by setting
<p>The student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ made mistakes, errors ■ is having a problem with plurals, possessives, tense, etc. ■ “left off” an <i>-s</i>, <i>-’s</i>, <i>-ed</i> 	<p>The student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ is following the patterns of home speech/informal English ■ is using a grammatical pattern different from formal English
<p>The student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ should have, is supposed to, needs to correct . . . 	<p>The student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ may <i>code-switch</i> (choose the language pattern to fit the setting)
<p>Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ correct the language 	<p>Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ help students “translate, change, code-switch” from one variety to another

Instead of thinking of language as “good or bad,” “right or wrong,” for example, consider seeing it as effective or ineffective, a fit or not in the setting. That’s actually an accurate characterization. Instead of talking about what students “should have” written or what they’re “supposed to” write, ask students to choose the language variety that fits the setting. Or, as Mrs. Little, veteran eighth-grade teacher in downtown Newport News, says, “Flip the switch!”

Instead of “correcting” student language, help students code-switch or “translate” their writing into whatever language variety is appropriate. If you’re conferencing with a student for an essay that’s supposed to be written in Standard English, and if you find in the draft informal patterns you have already covered in class, here’s how you might proceed: After talking about the content, organization, sentence structure, word choice, and so forth of the paper, when it comes time to talk about grammar, you might say, “Here [*Mama like to cook on the weekend*] you follow the pattern of informal subject-verb agreement [*Mama like*]. In this essay, we’re trying to use formal English. Can you code-switch it? Check our charts. . . . Good! Now, let’s check your paper for any other informal subject-verb patterns. . . .”

A teacher in one of Wheeler’s workshops was impatient with all this change: “What’s the big deal,” she asked. “They’re making errors! Correct ‘em! I don’t have time for all this. They’ve got to do it right and that’s that!” She thought that moving from correction to contrast was just “political correctness.”

Not at all. “Appropriate” language is not a politically correct codeword for Standard English. “Inappropriate” language is not a codeword for informal English, or everyday, community language. When we talk about appropriate and inappropriate, we truly mean “the variety that works (or doesn’t) in the setting.” This is a statement that is hard for teachers to hear. An activity that might help is one in which students and teachers think of a long list of settings where the most formal speech registers of Standard English would be wildly inappropriate. This will help allay people’s suspicion that “appropriate” language really means Standard English.

How we talk about things in the world reflects how we think about and understand those things. Think about the evolution of racial language in our country. One author of this book remembers that during her childhood, chocolate-covered Brazil nuts were called “nigger toes,” a label that would never fly today. Why? The “n” word reflects and embodies a worldview and a way of viewing Black people that is unacceptable to

us. As our understanding of the world changes, so our language changes. Same thing with language about language.

Armed with the information provided in *Code-Switching*, teachers come to school knowing they will be working inside a different mindset, talking about language in different ways, seeing the students themselves as competent speakers of their own variety. Now, how do teachers integrate their new understandings into the language arts curriculum?

The Top Ten Patterns

You will find it useful to come to class equipped by knowing the top ten grammar patterns characteristic of your students' writing. Across the country, a very small set of home speech grammar patterns often transfer into minority students' school writing.

The Code-Switching Shopping List in Appendix A names the top nine grammar patterns Wheeler has found and works with in her consulting with K–16 schools. We show a few rows in Figure 4.1 (page 60), saving the full chart for Appendix A, where we collect various code-switching tools for you. The shopping list was originally developed for middle school students and as a teacher tool for tracking students' progress in commanding the forms. We leave it to your creativity to adapt this tool for elementary students.

These patterns are probably familiar to any teacher of urban or maybe southern students. At first, you can look for just the top few of these patterns in your students' work—especially subject-verb agreement and showing past time. Also look in your students' writing for patterns with nouns—plurals and possessives.

When Students Speak Informal English

Here's another tough one for teachers. When your students are participating in class discussion or generally talking in school, you're sure to hear them using patterns from their community language. Often, teachers correct students' speech. The problem is that correction derails the meaning of the conversation and aggravates and alienates the students. Further, correction does not teach the Standard English patterns.

Of course, the linguistically informed teacher does not sit idly by. We recommend that you make mental or actual notes of the home speech patterns that occur in student speech or writing. Keep a notepad on your desk and jot down the different grammar structures you hear, or use the Code-Switching Shopping List to tally the most common grammar patterns your students use. One of Wheeler's teacher education students said

Code-Switching Shopping List				
Name: _____				
Do any of the top 10 or 12 informal English patterns appear in your paper? If so, put a check in the corresponding box and then code-switch to formal English! Put a smiley face, ☺, to show when you use formal patterns in your writing. "Flip the Switch!"				
Informal v. Formal English Patterns	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3	Paper 4
1. Subject-verb agreement She walk_ v. She walk <u>s</u>				
2. Showing past time (1) I finish_ v. I finish <u>ed</u>				
5. Making negatives She <u>won't never</u> v. She won't <u>ever</u>				
7. Plurality: "Showing more than one" Three cat_ v. Three cat <u>s</u>				
8. Possessive (singular) The dog_ tail v. the dog' <u>s</u> tail				

Figure 4.1. Abbreviated Code-Switching Shopping List, by Rebecca S. Wheeler and the Huntington Middle School Writing Project.

she is planning to keep a running record on her desk of her students' language. This way, if visitors to her room witness her not correcting students when they speak with their community language variety, she will be able to point to her ledger, saying, "See, I am fully aware of the students' grammar. I record examples of specific home speech patterns they use. Then in my next daily oral language time, I'll do a minilesson on the most common grammar patterns and have students translate from informal to formal English. Researchers at CUNY (Fogel & Ehri, 2000) have shown that translating from home speech to school speech is the most effective way to teach Standard English." Likewise equipped with your list of students' home speech patterns, you can choose what pattern you will analyze using a contrastive analysis chart during your next daily oral language time. This way, in class discussion you attend to the subject at hand rather than derailing the meaning and focus of the content lesson, you keep the students' goodwill, and you don't waste time trying to put in place a grammar "correction" that never takes root. Instead, you are paying attention to and working with students' grammar in a way that research shows to be successful—with the technique of contrastive analysis, whereby students systematically translate between informal and formal English.

Contrastive Analysis

Let's look now at some research showing that contrastive analysis is successful in teaching Standard English to minority dialect speakers. We summarize a few studies here, but for a current, extensive treatment of contrastive analysis and dialectally aware programs, see Rickford, Sweetland, and Rickford (2004).

Research from Chicago

Hanni Taylor, director of the Learning Assistance Center at predominantly White Aurora University, got a call from the dean of students. The dean had referred a young man to the center because "he didn't talk right and didn't write right" (Taylor, 1991, p. 1). A great number of referrals soon followed—all African American, all writing differently from what the university expected. Taylor understood the basic insights from second language acquisition. She understood that the students' home dialect was transferring to their Standard English writing (pp. 6–7). She knew the usual response was to implement the traditional correctionist approach, but she wanted to try out ESL methods with her second dialect learners. What she found was stunning.

Taylor contrasted the performance of African American students across two first-year writing classes. With one group, she used the traditional English department techniques: correcting students and marking their "errors." In the other classroom, she led her students in contrastive analysis, so they discovered for themselves the systematic contrasts between the grammatical patterns of AAE and SE.

Her results were dramatic: after eleven weeks, the control group using the correctionist model showed an 8.5 percent *increase* in African American features in their writing, but the experimental group, using contrastive analysis, showed a remarkable 59.3 percent *decrease* in African American features. Taylor observed that students had been neither "aware of their dialect" nor of "grammatical black English features that interfere in their writing" (1991, pp. 149–50). Rickford comments on Taylor's study:

The point Taylor made overall is that this process of comparing the two varieties seems to lead to much greater metalinguistic awareness of similarities and differences between the vernacular and the standard and allows kids to much more effectively negotiate the line between the two. (1999a, p. 340)

This is powerful affirmation for the success of code-switching and contrastive analysis as a way to teach Standard English mastery.

Research from New York

At the elementary level, we find similar research evidence that contrastive analysis is far more successful than traditional approaches in teaching Standard English. Educational psychologists Howard Fogel and Linnea Ehri (2000), from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, studied different techniques for helping third- and fourth-grade African American students learn Standard English. Like Hanni Taylor, they contrasted traditional correctionist methods with a version of contrastive analysis. The testing cohort was divided into three groups. At the beginning of the experiment, all students were able to translate approximately 31 percent of the African American language patterns into Standard English. In the first test group, the students read Standard English and the experimenters urged them to look closely at the grammar. In the second group, the experimenters did the same and then added one step—they instructed the students in details of the Standard grammar. The third experimental group used a form of contrastive analysis. In this group, the teachers exposed students to Standard English forms, instructed them in Standard English patterns, and then went one step further—they guided the students as students *practiced* transforming sentences containing African American English features into the Standard English equivalents (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p. 215).

Fogel and Ehri showed that contrastive analysis succeeds where traditional approaches fail. Indeed, they found that teaching Standard English grammar to children not only produced *no improvement* in their Standard English knowledge, but that some students produced even less Standard usage after receiving SE instruction. On the other hand, students in the contrastive analysis group nearly doubled their Standard English performance (2000, p. 222). Clearly, contrastive analysis holds great promise in fostering Standard English mastery.

Results from Georgia

Teachers in DeKalb County, Georgia, also implemented a contrastive approach. Thus, when a fifth grader answered a question with a double negative (*not no more*), the teacher prompted the student to code-switch, to which the student replied, “Not any more.” The children learned to switch from their home speech to school speech at appropriate times and places, and learned that “the dialect they might use at home is valuable and ‘effective’ in that setting, but not for school, for work—or for American democracy” (Cumming, 1997, p. B1). This program has been designated a “center of excellence” by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Conclusion

Our schools have long served students who come to school from diverse communities speaking diverse dialects. We had our wake-up call when a northern school system was sued for educational malpractice. In 1979, "Michigan Legal services filed suit [*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board*] . . . on behalf of fifteen black, economically deprived children residing in a low-income housing project" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 133). The mothers of the Green Road housing project in Ann Arbor, Michigan, found that their children, perfectly intelligent, were at risk for becoming "functionally illiterate." These plaintiffs claimed that the school system had "failed to properly educate the children[;] . . . that school officials had improperly placed the children in learning disability and speech pathology classes; that they had suspended, disciplined, and repeatedly retained" the children at grade level; and that "they had failed to overcome language barriers preventing the children from learning standard English and learning to read" (p. 133).

The case resulted in a decision for the plaintiffs. The trial established that the "school district had failed to recognize the existence and legitimacy of the children's language, Black English" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 135), and that because teachers failed to recognize the regular structures of the language, continuing to see it as broken English, they held "negative attitudes toward the children's language [which] led to negative expectations of the children . . . [and in turn to] self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 135). The court found that the suit had merit since federal law directed that "no child should be deprived of equal educational opportunity because of the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers" (Labov, 1995, p. 46). The judge found that Ann Arbor "had violated the children's rights to equal educational opportunity." The barrier, he stated, lay not in the child's language per se, but instead in the teachers' negative attitudes toward the children's language. This ruling

affirmed the obligation of school districts to educate black children and [established] within a legal framework, what has been well documented in academic scholarship: Black English is a systematic, rule-governed language system developed by black Americans as they struggled to combine the cultures of Africa and the United States. (Smitherman, 2000, p. 135)

The court gave Ann Arbor thirty days to remedy the violation of students' educational rights.

That was over twenty-five years ago. Where are we now? Have we made any progress? Precious little. Will we finally take “appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers” African American students face?

This book is about taking appropriate action. Through code-switching and contrastive analysis, we offer a way to unbind the negative stereotypes associated with African American English. We offer a research-proven way to teach Standard English. As Redd and Webb (2005) state, “code-switching is [the] goal, [and] contrastive analysis is the primary means . . . to achieve that end” (86). It’s about time. Let’s get to it!

“Speakers of [African American English] and other vernaculars have continued to be misunderstood, misdiagnosed, underrespected, and underassisted in their efforts to add Standard English to their linguistic repertoire. And they’ve also been limited in their school success and occupational mobility. This book will, I think, help to dismantle these barriers, enabling teachers to ‘reach out to the students of urban America’ in ways they weren’t able to do before.”

—John R. Rickford, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Centennial Professor of Linguistics, Stanford University

When African American students write or say “Mama jeep is out of gas” or “The Earth revolve around the sun,” many teachers—labeling this usage poor English or bad grammar—assume that their students have problems with possession or don’t know how to make subjects and verbs agree.

Forty years of linguistic research, however, demonstrates that the student is not making errors in Standard English—the child is writing or speaking correctly in the language patterns of the home and of the community. Building on the linguistic knowledge that children bring to school becomes the focus of this book, which advocates the use of “code-switching” to enable students to add another linguistic code—Standard English—to their linguistic toolbox.

Rather than drill the idea of “Standard English” into students by labeling their home language as “wrong,” the authors recommend teaching students to recognize the grammatical differences between home speech and school speech so that they are then able to choose the language style most appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose.

University researcher Rebecca Wheeler and urban elementary teacher Rachel Swords offer a practical, hands-on guide to code-switching, providing teachers with step-by-step instructions and numerous code-switching charts that can be reproduced for classroom use. The success of Wheeler’s presentations in urban school districts and the positive results that Swords has observed in her own classroom speak to the effectiveness of the research and of this approach. While the book focuses on language use in the elementary classroom, the procedures and materials introduced can be easily adapted for middle and high school students.

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