Broadening Our View of

Even many native English speakers need instruction in the Academic English that’s required to be successful in school.

By Debra O’Neal and Marjorie Ringler

Changing populations. Changing demographics. New census data. No Child Left Behind. When educators hear these phrases and terms, our minds often go directly to the issue of how we will teach children from linguistically diverse backgrounds or, more specifically, our growing population of English language learners (ELLs). After all, didn’t the 2007 U.S. census tell us that one in five children comes from a home where a language other than English is spoken?

Historically, ELLs have been defined by the results of states’ home language surveys, which determine whether a language other than English is the heritage language. However, while conducting our research on teacher preparedness and ELLs in rural North Carolina, we learned that many native English-speaking students also come to school lacking proficiency in English. Often, teachers cite such reasons as poverty, rural culture, interrupted formal education, and lack of background knowledge as causes for linguistic deficiency in school. For this reason, we need to examine a broader definition of English language learners and linguistic diversity.

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Sociolinguists study language in its social contexts and thereby study the varieties spoken by subgroups based on geographic region, ethnicity, age, educational background, or even job description. The common theory in sociolinguistics is that essentially “we are what we speak.” The language we use gives us a sense of identity and place (Wolfram and Shilling-Estes 2006). In other words, we’re defined, judged, and valued by the dialect or language that we speak. Some of us speak stigmatized or marginalized dialects and languages, while others speak the valued form, yet most of us communicate effectively in our subgroup. What makes dialects different from one another is their unique use of lexicon, their unique syntax, and their unique accent. What makes one better than the other is purely a value judgment.

If we look at dialects as separate and distinct from the standard, they don’t exist on a continuum that progresses from stigmatized and dialectal varieties to perfect English. Rather, they co-exist as parallel linguis-
Linguistic Diversity
tic varieties. Each is governed by its own set of rules, which serve separate purposes: One is used to communicate in our private communities and one is used to communicate in the public world.

Educators assume that children are fluent in Standard English when they enter school. When this isn’t the case, teachers have to teach Standard English and teach students that their social language (or dialect) is different from the language of books, the media, and academics. For example, in Southern English, a child might say, “I might could go,” while in Standard English this translates to, “I may be able to go.” Indeed, teachers who often speak regional dialects themselves still need to model the Standard English in which academics are communicated. Imposing Standard English on students can lead to a sense that their regional dialect is not valued. By showing students that Standard English and all of its dialects are governed by rules, albeit different rules, we can build a bridge to understanding the many roles language plays for us. A child who learns to code switch, or to consciously use a particular linguistic variety, learns to effectively use language to his or her benefit. Teaching children to become not only bilingual, but bi-dialectal needs to be a priority for all students.

**CODE SWITCHING AS A STRATEGY**

Code switching is a strategy that helps us communicate in socially and culturally appropriate ways. As we think about how we speak to different audiences — such as colleagues, pastors, doctors, children, and service workers — we recognize our own use of code switching. This is a natural and often unconscious response to modify our use of vocabulary, sentence structure, intonation, and topic of discussion according to our audience. In recent classroom observations in rural eastern North Carolina, for example, we witnessed a teacher using the concept of the “idiom police” to teach students how to recognize when the regional dialect was being used. Initially, students did an exercise to learn the meaning and use of idioms. She then asked students to stop her if anyone in the class, including the teacher, used an idiom. To her amazement, they became totally engaged and aware of the various linguistic varieties used in her classroom. These idioms were then, in a sense, translated into Standard English sentences. More important, the teacher began monitoring her own use of dialect while teaching academic content.

In the example above, by using “translation,” the teacher demonstrated the value of code switching and mastering control of Standard English. For educators, clearly defining expectations of communication and identifying instances where Standard English should be used then becomes an effective instructional strategy. The code-switching strategy cues students on the appropriate use of Standard English to communicate their learning both orally and in writing. This and other instructional and learning strategies need to be taught explicitly and

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used in a meaningful context in order to be internalized. Therefore, the students’ dialects are their native/home language and Standard English is their target language. This can lead us to the assertion that English language learners (ELLs) encompass not only those who speak another language, but those who speak a nonstandard dialect as well.

**BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

Another type of linguistic diversity occurs because students lack the appropriate background knowledge for learning at school. Teachers work with students who have had limited exposure to learning opportunities and, therefore, lack vocabulary and background knowledge on which to build. This limitation hinders learning new content, which may rely on prior knowledge and experience. For example, students from rural areas, students from poverty, and students from low-literacy families may not have traveled outside the area, may not have met people different than themselves nor been exposed to television, movies, computers, and print materials. Such students also have limited English proficiency not because they speak another language, but because environmental factors have limited their access to their own language.

**ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AS THE TARGET LANGUAGE**

To fully redefine linguistic diversity, consider another dialect: academic language. Research shows that in order to be successful academically, students must have academic language fluency (Marzano 2004). Marzano even says that children of poverty are “exposed to a fraction of the language that chil-
dren in working-class and professional families are” (2004: 10).

If academic language proficiency is needed for success in school and, therefore, life, and children in rural and urban areas are coming to school speaking marginalized dialects, isn’t academic language a second language for all students? What if a student doesn’t speak “academic language”? What if his or her dialect is a regional variety that is dramatically different from the standard rules of grammar and has a nonmainstream lexicon? How will such a student be successful?

What is academic language? Ruby Payne identifies formal register (language of work and school) and casual register (social language between friends and family) (2005). She refers to the social language as primary discourse or, as we have stated above, the student’s native/home language. She goes on to say that formal register is their secondary discourse. Formal register is a second language, and teachers need to teach this language because students don’t acquire it as they do their native/home language.

Is Standard English the only type of formal register? Isn’t academic language the tested language in schools? For example, as we observed in our research with ELLs and mainstream students, students were being taught math concepts using social terminology. The teacher used such terms as “take away” and “left over” when describing mathematical operations. But problems on the standardized test used academic terminology, such as “subtraction” and “remainder.” Isn’t it possible that the child has a clear grasp of the math concept, but in a language different from the language that’s used on a test? Therefore, we believe that there is a distinction between Standard English and Academic English, as the requirements for academic language are content and structure specific. For example, the language of math differs from the language of science, social studies, and literary analysis, and the linguistic structures we use in those content areas vary. This is evident in university curricula in which courses are offered to teach writing specifically for the sciences and humanities. Doesn’t this make academic language another mode of linguistic discourse or the true target language?

**ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AS THE EQUALIZER**

All learners — regardless of proficiency in their dialect or Standard English — must be proficient in Academic English to be successful in academic settings. The fact that all students need to learn Aca-
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about teaching English in their content areas. Often, they see themselves as just the content-area teacher but don’t focus on the language necessary for academic fluency in the content area. Are we saying that every teacher should also be an ESL teacher? Yes and no. We aren’t saying teachers need a second degree in linguistics. But we are saying that understanding that linguistic diversity exists may help us reframe our instruction to include academic language objectives alongside content objectives.

In a yearlong professional development of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), a research-based model of instruction that stresses the integration of language and content instruction, teachers in our study discovered that this model was applicable to all students. Academic language is indeed an additional language for all learners.

While teaching vocabulary in preparation for a unit on body systems, we observed a 4th-grade teacher comparing and contrasting content language to students’ native/home language. She tried to elicit the meaning for “tissue” and “organ” in the content and specifically stated that she didn’t mean the tissue that’s used to blow noses or the organ played at church. By so doing, she explicitly compared social language and academic language. In conversation with her after the lesson, she stated that she would not have made this comparison before our work on academic language proficiency. Rebecca Wheeler used the same strategy to teach code switching to urban black students and found that students successfully compared and contrasted the rules of informal English to formal English (Wheeler and Swords 2004). Comparing and contrasting students’ native/home language to academic language is used as a tool to learn academic or formal English.

Chamot and O’Malley addressed academic language in the classroom by first looking at the academic language functions a student must be able to perform (1994). Their key point was that academic language must be developed interactively. The models of instruction often associated with second language learning and teaching, particularly the SIOP Model, emphasize the value of interaction for language development. We believe that interaction in the classroom is often done in the students’ native/home language or social language and that Academic English is relegated to content vocabulary only. Since we know that vocabulary alone doesn’t distinguish how we speak and write in academic settings — tone and syntax matter as well — we conclude that Academic English is indeed an additional language for all students.

REDEFINING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Are all learners, therefore, linguistically diverse? Yes! We can no longer think of native/home language as reserved for languages other than English. We need to include all of the varieties of English: regional dialects, nonstandard, and marginalized varieties. What’s the common language we’re trying to teach? Is it the local dialect of English? Is it Standard English? Or is it Academic English? Our target language for academic settings is Academic English, and by using the students’ native/home language or dialect, we can bridge the gap and achieve that goal. We believe that our pool of linguistically diverse learners includes all learners and that by using strategies often associated only with ELLs, teachers will provide students with the skills and opportunities for academic success.

REFERENCES


