“On the Lookout for Language”: Children as Language Detectives

by Mary Beth Monahan

Summary:

This article was written by Mary Beth Monahan, a teacher, who “hoped to promote a richer and more robust view of language diversity” (207). To her, “it was vitally important to spotlight language varieties, not simply as colorful alternatives to ‘standard English’ and thus linguistic novelties, but as basic phenomena of language itself” (207). The school where she worked was pretty diverse, and this was more reason for her to make her students “understand how local literacies applied to them and not simply to ‘others’ from different social classes, races, and ethnicities” (207).

To introduce the topic of language awareness, Monahan presented a poem to her students. The poem was delivered in the voice of a 14-year-old, who “took adult ways with words and used them as tools to fashion her own rebellion” (207). The purpose of presenting this poem was for the students to recognize that language is both “elastic and heteroglossic (composed of many voices)” (207). It could be manipulated to fit the needs of the speaker. Monahan aimed to show her students that “we, as speakers and writers, are ventriloquists to the extent that we take on others’ words, expressions, and language forms all of the time” (208).

To further illustrate her point, Monahan brought in a flyer to a book fair which said “Phiction is phat! Books are the Bomb! Reading Rules!” (208). She discussed with her students “how parents took on children’s ways with words or voices to manipulate the entire student body into thinking that reading is cool” (208). Heteroglossia played into this example because the parents’ used terminologies of the youth to voice out.
Part of the class’s language studies was called “Park Bench Detectives.” This activity required the students to sit in a pretend bench (which was a couch in reality) and engage in conversation using different “roles.” The students would take turns sitting on the ‘park bench,’ and change up their ‘language’ depending on how their current partner responds. After these, the class discussed “the idea that students automatically know how to switch codes and to adjust registers in order to make each new scene work” (208). This exercise is supposed to make the students realize that they’ve acquired different voices and manipulated them so they’d fit in the context.

Historical forces shape language. Monahan states that in the ancient times students were to “invoke noted authorities” to establish credibility for their argument and that the students were discredited if they used their personal opinion to support their argument because their words weren’t as powerful as of those of a noted authority. Monahan compares this to how teachers forbid the use of the pronoun “I” in formal writing because it “doesn’t sound professional”. (210) By introducing this view, Monahan made her students analyze the use of the pronoun “I” from various types of press and interviews from parents so that the students have different perspectives of how people view the pronoun “I “ in formal writing. Through research, students concluded “I” was a tool that they can use to portray their view and support that they had similar experiences.

Monahan states that “It is important for students to appreciate how language practices, conventions, and even words come into existence; to see that language is in a continual process of creation, forever shaped by social, historical, and political forces and even by people like themselves.” (211) She uses Frindle, a novel by Andrew Clements, that portrays how linguistics are created and adopted through social convention, as an example to prove to her students that
language is not “just a given—a fixed, finite, and value-free system of rules.” (211) Additionally, Monahan used Evslin’s version of Ulysses so that students can identify the etymologies of English words that were adopted from Greece and Rome. By doing this exercise, the students were able to have an understanding of how the word came to be and they used the exercise to make up their own background story of the word and then compare it with the actual etymology. Through the exercise, Monahan was able to prove to the students that “language is living, changing and responsive.” (211)

Political forces also shape language. Mildred D. Taylor’s The Friendship is a story about how Bee, an African American man, was shot in the leg by his white friend, John because he addressed him by his first name. Monahan used this story to portray how language can be used to depict a subordinate role/ segregation and social order.

Monahan concludes that by having the students learn how language is shaped historically, socially and politically, “students are able to see the tensions of tradition/ intervention and constraint/choice that are always at play in any instance of language use.” (214)

**How can this article be used in Major Essay #3**

This article can be used in several ways for Major essay #3. It highlights the importance of language in the classroom, and how it is crucial that teachers emphasize the importance of language. Teachers should have students study the impact of language varieties in their everyday lives. By making students aware of the ways that language can be manipulated and used as a tool, we can teach them the importance of knowing a variety of linguistic styles which will help
them be as effective as possible in the contexts they encounter. Hopefully, this will motivate students to work hard to master different linguistic varieties (including SE, which is necessary for academic and in many cases social success). You can use quotes from this article in your essay to give examples of how teachers can promote a higher understanding of language in the classroom by performing certain activities. You can also use certain quotes to emphasize the importance of teaching SE in the classroom and at the same time respecting language varieties.

**Useful quotes:**

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“In my mind, it was vitally important to spotlight language varieties, not simply as colorful alternatives to “standard English” and thus as linguistic novelties, but as basic phenomena of language itself.”

“To this extent, “local literacies,” or language varieties, are not merely exotic specialty items for the educated language consumer; they are among the many linguistic resources available to all our students.”

“I did not want students to think of local literacies in terms of “linguistic ghettos.” Such a view is not only grossly inaccurate and patently offensive; it also balkanizes language in ways that distort, disfigure, and ultimately compromise all students’ voices.”

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“Kate Bloomfield’s poem also demonstrated a related property of language— heteroglossia. I capitalized on this poem to show students how we, as speakers and writers, are ventriloquists to the extent that we take on others’ words, expressions, and language forms all of the time.”

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“We also explored the idea that students use expressions from shared experiences of popular culture (e.g., television and movies) to show that they are ‘in the know.’”

Students should be taught to see that they can “wield language effectively as a means of gaining and maintaining access to the ongoing exchange.”

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“Students know a great deal about how language works and are generally eager to discuss their own practices as language users. Even students as young as 11 and 12 years old, in the context of a structured inquiry, are aware that they engage in constant code switching as they strategically and selectively deploy their verbal repertoires in school and at home (Hymes, 1973). These sixth graders saw local literacies (among friends, family members, and teachers) as different options for achieving certain academic and interpersonal goals. The voices they adopted, in effect, were ways of moving in and out of relationships with particular people in particular circumstances and with particular aims in mind. Students can discern these nuances of language use and can also identify such subtleties of local literacies if given the opportunity to talk about talk (Heath, 1983).”

“certain power holders (people or institutions) fight for control over discourse to thereby maintain a social order that privileges them and advances their particular interests.”

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About the word “ain’t: “this controversial little word often accomplishes a number of social goals—irking our parents, establishing insider status within our peer groups, or showing that we just don’t care about “proper” language.”

“Raise students’ awareness that language forms are historically, socially, and ideologically constituted. Too often students are led to believe that language is just a given—a fixed, finite, and value-free system of rules. It is important for students to appreciate how language practices, conventions, and even words come into existence; to see that language is in a continual process of creation, forever shaped by social, historical, and political forces and even by people like themselves.”

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“language is living, changing, and responsive rather than fixed, finite, and immutable. By focusing on the power plays that are often at work within and behind language, I wanted these sixth graders to realize that their language choices in conversations and in writing often reflect their own feelings of power or powerlessness in an exchange.”

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“We need to be careful about how we present language varieties so that our students appreciate them as more than quaint artifacts from a cultural bazaar.”
“Such investigations—into how we adopt and adapt different voices to accomplish certain social, emotional, political, and academic goals; into whose voices we ventriloquize and why; and into how voices serve as resources for achieving a certain status or identity, for arguing against certain values and world views, or for participating in certain communities—are potential inroads for students to both value and learn from the inherent diversity of language. Such an approach might cultivate in students a more critical and reflective disposition as language users, a disposition that, in my mind, is ultimately necessary for overturning deficit approaches to linguistic differences (NewLondon Group, 1996).”

“If we can enrich students’ understanding of language itself, then we are that much closer to altering their views of what it means to be competent as language users. For how we define communicative competence is ultimately how we position students’ voices within the context of instruction and, in effect, how we treat language diversity.”

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“As detectives of language studying the various historical, political, and social forces that shape and are shaped by language, students come to see the tensions of tradition/ invention and constraint/choice that are always at play in any instance of language use.”