I have to admit, I was always embarrassed by my father's Bronx accent growing up. When he would say that he drove “trew da tunnel,” I would cringe. To me, it represented a lower-class way of speaking, when in fact it was just his accent.

When a child speaks incorrectly in the classroom, they should not be “corrected” right there and then in front of everyone, but I do believe that they should be made aware of the mistake. Students learn so much of the “wrong” or unconventional way of speaking outside of the classroom (hallways, peers, and even their families) that they need a place to learn or at least hear English spoken correctly.

(Reflections posted on electronic “discussion board.”)

This article describes my efforts to engage teachers in language study in a graduate course involving inservice and preservice teachers enrolled in Literacy Studies and Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs at Hofstra University, New York City. In the course Language, Culture, and Identity: Issues for Teachers and Children, we study language like linguists: looking closely at language in use through in-class experiences and field projects. Our interpretations are informed with readings and discussion.

We are language arts teachers. But when I’ve asked teachers in my classes and at conferences how many have taken a course in linguistics, affirmative responses are rare; few teacher education programs require any linguistics courses. Teachers are often aware of socio-psycholinguistic theoretical orientations towards reading and writing. For example, they understand the value of invented spelling in fostering young writers and that reading involves meaning making. However, as the comments above illustrate, many teachers haven’t really thought much about oral language.

I believe most teachers have the best intentions toward children and their literacy learning. However, teachers often base decisions about language use on their best hunches or “common sense” beliefs about “good and bad” language practices. These beliefs are supported by casual observations, as we tend to notice examples that confirm our current theories. The linguist Peter Fries points out that, “Even professional linguists who have studied the language for many years such as C.C. Fries and John Sinclair have commented that often something they ‘knew’ about English was shown to be wrong when they looked at the data” (Fries, 2005). Like linguists who are given a chance to review evidence, many experienced and novice teachers find that systematic, descriptive language inquiry—focusing on samples of actual language in use—leads them to reform old assumptions and gain new insights about their own and their students’ language usage.

Certainly, there is much theoretical debate about pedagogical responses to linguistic diversity (see, for example, Delpit, 1995; Gilyard, 1991; Nieto, 1996; Ruiz, 1988; Valenzuela, 1999) As educators, we all want children to leave their school years with the linguistic facility to move between various language communities, including those of their home, work, and neighborhoods. Whether pedagogical advocates favor inquiry and experiential language study (i.e., Y. Goodman, 2003; Wells, 2001), culturally pluralist or culturally relevant perspectives (Gilyard, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1996), or a more culturally explicit approach to teaching language (Delpit, 1995; Reyes, 1992), most language educators agree that language teaching starts with respecting and understanding the language children bring to school.
MY GOALS FOR LANGUAGE STUDY

My primary goal in the course is to cultivate a linguistic knowledge base as well as data analysis processes that facilitate close, systematic observations, so teachers working with children and young adults will be more likely to make informed decisions about language learning and teaching on a day-to-day basis. Course topics include language systems, language variation, language learning, and discourse or conversation in and outside of classrooms. Given the range of experiences graduate students are likely to have in courses and in the multilingual settings where they teach, I start my course with language diversity and language change. Sociolinguistic perspectives on language variation among diverse populations are examined to expose common myths and to understand the language experiences of students from multilingual and multidialectal urban settings. Through these topics, I can point out relationships between language, culture, and identity, and develop, through observations and analyses, the idea that linguistic diversity occurs in all areas of language study.

The course immerses graduate students in the discourse and practice of sociolinguistics—using linguistic terminology and analysis while engaged in workshops and inquiry studies. I believe teachers need a knowledge base of language systems and processes in order to document and evaluate children's language and support language development. However, rather than starting with exercises on phonology, syntax, and semantics, I introduce language systems in classroom workshops within the context of other course topics. Phonology and grammar are less abstract and overwhelming subjects when teachers have a purpose for using linguistic terminology.

Sociolinguistic study has the potential for shifting teachers' foci to students' understandings and abilities, rather than focusing on mistakes and deficits. Linguistic inquiry—studying language through linguistics—involves taking a descriptive stance, that is, documenting or describing or explaining language processes and practices within the context of everyday social activity. Social conventions of language in use are observed and described, rather than evaluated or prescribed as "correct." Language forms that do not initially appear to be conventional might—upon close study—be examples of linguistic diversity or of the constructive (inventive) process of language learning.

The distinction between linguistic understandings and metalinguistic understandings is an important one for language teachers. Every speaker or listener has intuitive linguistic understandings of the complex rules of phonology, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics in their home language. This does not mean that speakers can define or explain those rules in linguistic terms—an indication of metalinguistic understanding. In the course, we explore our intuitive linguistic understandings and observe how children construct and internalize these intuitive social conventions. While exploring and observing language through discussions, readings, and course assignments, metalinguistic understandings develop as we make these implicit linguistic understandings explicit.

Studying language provides teachers with the expertise for evaluating and critiquing the linguistic premises underlying instructional materials and pedagogical approaches. We have come to see that we can't teach language as if the systems and processes are separate from meaningful linguistic contexts and larger cultural contexts. Yet, teachers continue to be asked to teach aspects of language—such as grammar or phonics—outside of meaningful linguistic and cultural contexts. Recent federal laws have mandated the systematic direct instruction of phonics varies depending on your spoken dialect, children are frustrated when they try to get children to identify "log" and "dog" as rhyming pairs. Do these rhyme in your dialect? In Long Island, children (and adults) say these words differently: lahg with the vowel sound in “hot” and dawg with the vowel sound in “bought.” These examples point out that phonics varies depending on your spoken dialect, a concept very familiar to linguists (i.e., Goodman, 1993; Wilde, 1997; Strauss 2005) but ignored by instructional programs. Throughout the course, we use firsthand language data to develop and refine our awareness of language, moving from informal "language journals" to more in-depth field studies.

CULTIVATING A LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE BASE THROUGH OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION

We begin our data collections with our own "language stories"—the kinds of funny (or not so
funny) incidents that we tend to laugh (or cry) about with family and close friends. I start with my story and the bewilderment that a seemingly minor pronunciation difference created among people who assumed a shared knowledge of the English language. When speaking to a group of teachers in Alabama about relationships between literacy and other sign systems (art, music, etc.), I suggested they might encourage children to explore different media for illustrations such as pencils, *crayons*, paint, and so on. After the talk, one teacher asked me to repeat what I had said besides paints and pencils. In my midwestern dialect, “crayons” sounds like one syllable, “crans.” After several puzzled exchanges, she finally understood. “Oh, you mean *CRAY-ons*.”

We use these anecdotes to get to know each other on the first nights of class. In addition, the collection of class stories introduces the field of linguistics, allowing us to discuss our stories and tease out their linguistic issues. The distinction between *CRAY-ons* (Alabama) and *crans* (Michigan) is an example of a regional dialect variation. This is a variation in phonology or accent. The story illustrates that dialect differences sometimes result in confusion or miscommunication. On the other hand, the teacher’s question indicates that she understood the rest of my talk, suggesting that our Southern and Midwestern dialects have many more commonalities than differences. The story about linguistic diversity also has implications for reading instruction. The Alabama teacher and I must have different phonics rules for “crayon,” since we each pronounce the word differently. In *Phonics Phacts* (Goodman, 1993), “phonics” is described as the complex set of relationships between written and oral language within a speaker’s dialect. The Alabama pronunciation may appear more phonetic, but I don’t experience difficulties understanding “crayon” when I read. While there is some controversy on this point (see Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), my own observations and research indicate that linguistic diversity may influence reading comprehension, but variations in pronunciation do not cause difficulties for readers unless specific pronunciations are prescribed (Goodman & Goodman, 2000).

Teachers’ stories often focus on children’s language development of phonological conventions. One mother of young children shared, “My three-year-old daughter has a difficult time with specific sounds. My son had purchased a fish for her and she was eager to put it in the tank. . . . however, the water needs to sit for 24 hours so she was not able to do it that first night. The next morning, bright and early, before my eyes were even open, she came bouncing into my room. ‘My pish, my pish—I put it in the sink now?’ She had to drag me to the tank before I realized what she was trying to say.” Families cherish and even adopt early pronunciations and are not inclined to correct young children’s speech.

Some stories highlight the constructivist nature of language learning. For example, my three-year-old son once said, “Mommy, would you *unpeel* the banana for me.” Other stories remind us that language learning continues throughout our lives. A student reported, “When I first came in contact with the word ‘disciples,’ it was in a book. To myself, I pronounced it *dis-ples.* When I learned what ‘disciples’ meant, I was surprised that the two words meant the same thing. I didn’t realize they were the same word.” Students’ heritage language stories remind us of relationships between language and everyday cultural practices: “Throughout my whole life I called a strainer or colander a ‘sculapasta,’ which is Italian for strainer. I never knew the English word for it, and whenever I needed one, I would say, ‘You know the thing for the macaroni—to get the water out.’”

Unlike the students I worked with in Michigan, who believe they speak “standard English,” students from the New York City/Long Island (NYC/LI) area realize they speak a distinct dialect as soon as they leave home. Some of their stories address phonological variations, such as “r-lessness,” a common feature of NYC/LI speakers: “When I went away to college, my friends who are not from New York made fun of me for not pronouncing my ‘r’’s in words. This made me much more conscious of how I speak.” Another story describes the prosodic variation (pitch and rhythm) of an immigrant-influenced language community: “Because Italian was my first language, and because I still speak it at home, I was always made fun of (in terms of) the way I spoke. They said I have this ‘sing song’ way of speaking.”

Language stories help us examine our linguistic pet peeves. One student wrote, “When we moved to New Jersey in seventh grade, my sister,
who is a year younger than me, started saying all her sentences as a question. It drove me crazy.” A common pet peeve involves the childhood pronunciation of mine. “The one thing that drives me nuts is when my kids say mines instead of mine.” In this example, the unconventional form (or “mistake”) may indicate the overgeneralization that occurs in language development. We say yours and hers, so why not mines? The masculine form (His jacket is his.) is also inconsistent—I suppose because it would be difficult to say hises. As we analyze these examples, we notice the complexities children engage in while learning language.

Stories often explore semantic variations in wording between NYC/LI and other regional dialects: “I went to Penn State University where the majority of students are from Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. My first year, I was in culture shock. People spoke differently from what I was used to in Long Island. Heros are Hogies or subs. Sprinkles are jimmies. Diet Coke is not called soda, but pop! My all-time favorite is ‘Yinz.’ Yinz is like saying ‘You guys.’ I can thankfully say I didn’t pick up any of this Pennsylvania Jargon!”

Through discussion of our own language stories, it becomes evident that these aspects of language variation, language change, and language communities are universal, and do not only occur in isolated (“other”) speech communities.

In discussing these stories, we refine understandings of language systems and processes, while defining aspects of language variation (regional, cultural, generational, gendered, etc.) and language learning. Language stories also raise issues of relationships among language, group memberships, and linguistic identities. It is striking when highly educated professionals tell stories of feeling insecure about their own language, of being chastised by administrators for saying “you know” too much, or discriminated against because of an “immigrant accent.” Some speakers cling to their New York speech patterns, while others work to be rid of them. In maintaining her social identity as a New York speaker, the student above derides “Pennsylvania Jargon.” This probably represents playful banter among college students, however language attitudes can reflect stereotyping and discrimination—especially when power relationships are in play. Through discussion of our own language stories, it becomes evident that these aspects of language variation, language change, and language communities are universal, and do not only occur in isolated (“other”) speech communities.

Once students begin to notice language, they find it is very hard to stop. Students jot down stories and overheard speech samples in language journals and share them at the beginning of each class. Our university makes use of Blackboard, which includes a discussion board feature where students can post comments and reflections between class sessions. Student postings about “heros” (NYC/LI) and “hogies” (Philadelphia) began an informal inquiry throughout one semester. Students uncovered additional terms for what one student defined as “anything on a long roll,” such as “sub” (midwest) or “Italian” (Maine). One student wondered whether the term “hero” was related to the Greek “gyro”—which is pronounced “ýero.” A curious colleague began looking up references and posting them online. “The submarine originated in Groton, Connecticut, among employees of the Electric Boat corporation, a manufacturer of actual submarines.” Informal language stories and examples piqued our linguistic curiosity and helped us to appreciate, enjoy, and celebrate the language variations that we notice.

**INFORMING OUR INQUIRY WITH READINGS AND RESEARCH**

Our inquiries into language data are informed by a variety of resources, including linguistic texts, published research, newspaper articles, poetry, documentaries, literature, and film clips. We start on the first night of class with McWhorter’s (1998) introduction to *The Word on the Street*, which addresses discrepancies between “common sense” views of language and beliefs generally accepted among linguists. His key points are the following: 1) language is always changing; 2) any language is a “bundle of dialects” that all “arise from the same process of gradual, unstoppable change” (p. 3); 3) within our multilingual, global society, “language mixture is a natural and inevitable part of how languages [change]” (p. 4); and 4) All languages and dialects are equally logical, rule-governed, and complex. We also read McWhorter’s (2000) *Spreading the Word: Language and Dialect in America*, a highly readable book for opening discussions with teachers about language diversity.

A *New York Times* article, “Disco Rice and Other Trash Talk” (Urbina, 2004), describes lan-
language use among New York City sanitation workers. These workers, living and speaking within a tight-knit group with many shared experiences, create insider communities through specialized language, such as “disco rice” (maggots). The article highlights the fact that language variation can be a badge of social membership and illustrates how language develops in a specific discourse community (Gee, 1991). Like many articles about language practices, it is also lots of fun to read and sparks interest in further language study.

Our third text is the poem “Rayford’s Song” (Inada, 1994), in which a young narrator tells of a black student who asks if he can sing his own song during music class. Rayford’s rendition of the gospel song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” stuns and inspires his fourth-grade class, but the teacher responds by correcting his pronunciation. The poet/narrator reports that the children’s songs “on the tip of their tongues” remain unsung. In correcting Rayford’s English, his teacher not only silences Rayford—but lets the class know that there is a canon of literature, even in music class, and the songs (and language) of their home communities are not included. Her sharp rebuke signals that “standard” and “correct” forms of language are valued over the ability to express meanings, make personal and cultural connections, and explore aesthetic and textual qualities of language. Inada’s poem places sociocultural and pedagogical issues related to language in a human classroom context. One of my students, Kathryn, reflects the impact this poem has on teachers in the course, “Rayford’s Song is an example of how a teacher can silence his or her students. This story allows teachers to understand how children and even adults feel while being corrected.”

In these initial explorations, teachers often reconsider long-held attitudes toward variations in dialects and language forms. Another student, Amanda, writes, “I thought people that spoke a slang version of English were either being lazy or were uneducated. McWhorter made us see that slang is in fact the natural change of language.” One teacher began to question the language attitudes prevalent among her colleagues, “As a teacher, I always hear my colleagues comment on their students’ manner of speaking in a derogatory way, and while in the past I have agreed, I am at this point more inclined to question ‘why’ the children speak this way. . . . I think all teachers should read this book and explore language so that they will be better informed about the variations that exist in the English language. I think this study would help teachers to be more understanding and less condemning when their students use slang instead of the standard in English language.”

Lauren comments on a shift in awareness that she perceives in the class: “I think from what we’ve learned in only two weeks of this course, we are all going to reevaluate how we respond to students who speak differently from the rest of the bunch.” In discussion and reflections, students tease out relationships between language variation and communication. Darlene writes, “No matter how language is used through different dialects, slang, sounds, structure, and whether it’s logical or not, the bottom line is that this is how we are able to communicate and make meaning of our world.” In a written reflection, Gina describes home language as part of a person’s identity as well as a resource for learning: “I agree with McWhorter that a person’s dialect may be different from yours, but it is not necessarily bad grammar or bad English. It is their own and it is hard to change it, not that you should. It is their own way of understanding something.”

On the Internet discussion board, teachers pose questions to each other based on their everyday encounters with language variation and concerns about whether or not they should teach a “right way” to speak: “I teach four- and five-year-olds. . . . Now when one of my kids asks me “Bathroom please,” do I correct them or do I let them just go without correcting them? I must say for the most part I do correct them. I don’t want them to feel hurt or shut down by my corrections. I also don’t want them to move on to kindergarten speaking incorrectly.” In response, I point them to an analysis of their thinking, as suggested by McWhorter, “The idea that there is one ‘best’ English shining in the sky is so intuitively plausible and so relentlessly hammered into us throughout our lives that it is natural for teachers [and parents] to consider part of their jobs to be upholding standard English” (McWhorter, 2000, ix).

We all struggle with this issue, recognizing that children also have to function in a world where negative attitudes toward some dialects and languages
are prevalent. Chanda explores the reality of language standards and hierarchies in a longer reflection paper on the course readings and discussions: “As a third-grade teacher, I find myself wavering back and forth on the topic. I guess it would be great if we could have the best of both worlds. However, the reality of the situation is that there is a standard that we have to live up to and children today are being called upon not only to reach the standards set by others but to surpass them. While I agree with McWhorter’s theory that we are experiencing an evolution of language, and that all the languages are equal, the reality is that there is a standard and probably in our lifetime that standard won’t change. Therefore, it is our responsibility as educators to respect these variations in our students’ speech and to build upon it. We can do this by teaching them the “correct” way to speak in a way that lets them be themselves and be able to reach their goals in the world of standard English.”

Chanda, an African American teacher, reminds us of what is at stake—or rather who is at stake. Like Delpit (1995), she is concerned that African American children need to learn the “codes of power” in order to succeed in mainstream America. Chanda recognizes and raises sociopolitical complexities when she points out that the African American and immigrant children she teaches must not only “reach the standards set by others but surpass them.” Children who enter school speaking stigmatized dialects (such as AAE or Appalachian English) are generally expected to adopt “school language” (or Academic English) for learning, even in the earliest grades. I argue that such deficit assumptions translate into practices that further privilege students who come to school speaking a variation of English considered appropriate in school.

Questions about teaching language come up in every discussion; however, we place these questions on hold while we explore linguistics, language diversity, and language learning. Through language study, questions are revised and made more explicit: How do we learn language? What is the role of correction in language learning? Often inquiry studies challenge and contradict some of our basic assumptions. If we find, as I describe later, that young children are already code-switching adeptly between home and “school” English—a host of new questions can be raised about the goals and foci of teaching language arts.

INFORMING OUR UNDERSTANDINGS THROUGH SYSTEMATIC, DATA-BASED STUDY

Language study in the course begins with exploratory inquiry including informal observations, sharing expertise and perceptions, teasing out assumptions, and browsing through the literature. Teachers often find linguistic inquiry daunting, feeling they lack the expertise and understandings to collect and interpret data. They find, however, that language journals, class studies, and small-group studies help them feel more comfortable as “novice linguists.” In the next sections, I describe the focused linguistic inquiry work students undertake as they listen closely and apply a wide range of concepts and descriptions to the talk around them.

Moving from Exploratory to Focused Inquiry Studies

Students start a more formal data collection process by recording and transcribing a 5- to 10-minute oral sample of an adult family member, friend, or colleague. This provides the class with a range of language samples from New York City/Long Island speech communities. The graduate students, typically elementary teachers, are often puzzled by our focus on adult language rather than children’s language in the classroom. I point out that samples of adult language provide us with examples of the conventions of proficient speakers. The study of mature speakers’ language, undertaken in familiar speech communities, makes it more likely that teachers will question assumptions about relationships between oral language variations, cultural background, social class, and intelligence.
When transcribing these short recordings, students realize, for example, that all speakers use informal language features (e.g., “gonna,” “you know”). In contrast, when the focus is on children’s language samples, language development becomes an issue. Children’s language has more potential for confusing performance (what we hear children say) and competence (what children actually understand). Language variation is first addressed through collecting samples from experienced (typically adult) speakers, and samples of children’s language are used later to focus on language learning.

After collecting a sample of an LI/NYC mature speaker, students listen to the tapes in small groups, using transcripts to informally note any “interesting language” that they hear. It is difficult to hear the dialect features that mark your own speech community, so working in groups is helpful. In addition to regional or cultural dialect features, students notice second-language features, storytelling strategies, discourse markers (e.g., “like,” “you know”), intonational patterns, and other features of conversational discourse.

After these informal explorations, we list examples of “interesting language” on the board. Using sticky notes, we list each token (or language example) and then group them together if they seem similar. For example, the spoken sentence, “I spent tree dollars” provides examples of two different phonological features (sometimes referred to as a speaker’s accent) of a New York City speaker that we can explain linguistically. In using “tree” for “three,” the speaker shifts from the voiceless alveolar stop /t/ (tree). (The “th” sounds in “thigh” [voiceless] and “thy” [voiced] are called interdental fricatives because of the point of utterance, with the tongue placed between the teeth [interdental], and manner of utterance with air blown through the mouth [fricative]. Point, voicing, and manner are the distinguishing aspects of English phonemes.) The second token (“dollars”) illustrates the r-less feature common across dialects in the New York and Long Island area.

Students post tokens on a white board under categories of phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, or discourse—which furthers our understandings of these linguistic systems or aspects of language. The next week, I provide small groups of students with tokens representing the same linguistic feature, and students work to construct a linguistic rule or pattern that describes that language feature. This process makes it clear that language features (even those considered “poor grammar”) are systematic and rule-governed. For example, “r-lessness” occurs at the end of a syllable and following a vowel. In New York, the /r/ shifts to “uh” so that door sounds like “doah”—as opposed to the AAE r-less pronunciation made famous through the rap term “ho” (whore).

Following these exploratory discussions, the class forms small groups for a focused inquiry study of a specific feature of language variation or aspect of language study. Groups have focused on: a) R-lessness (for example: pahty (party), teacha (teacher)); b) Interdental fricatives [dose (those) boys, tree (three) dollars]; c) Semantic Variations [pop/soda, lollipop/sucker, etc.]; d) Code-switching; e) Slang; and f) Discourse Markers.

Using Dialects in American Schools and Communities (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), some groups of students looked closely at a specific dialect feature they noticed among some NYC/Long Island speakers. For example, the “interdental fricatives” group looked at pronunciation of the “th” sounds among speakers from various New York communities. The group found that shifting from the voiced interdental fricative /θ/ to the voiceless alveolar stop /d/ in words like “the” is common in many working-class New York communities, as well as African American, and immigrant communities. Students found that /θ/ can be substituted for the voiceless interdental in words like “three” by speakers from Brooklyn. (To distinguish the two “th” sounds, hold your hand to your voice box and say “thy” (voiced /θ/) and “thigh.” (voiceless /θ/). While African American English (AAE) speakers may say “den” for “then,” they do not typically say “tree” for “three.” Careful study helps teachers to see that dialect features occur in specific linguistic contexts and communities and not in others.

Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1999) suggest that teachers follow initial observations by forming hypotheses about when and how dialect occurs. Hypotheses are tested through further documentation, particularly by looking for
counter-examples and reading linguistic studies. The “R-less” group hypothesized that r-lessness is a low-status feature that occurs only in working-class New York City communities and among African Americans. Through observation and reading, the teachers found r-lessness is present in many American and British dialects, including some high-status speech communities. They discovered r-lessness was considered high status in the first part of the 20th century, and early movie actors were coached to remove the /r/ from their speech. In addition, r-lessness occurred in the speech of four U.S. presidents—each representing different speech communities.

Each member of the code-switching group focused on different aspects of shifts between languages, dialects, or registers. A Korean American student observed language in her own family to see when Korean and English were spoken during a family gathering. A bilingual teacher studied code-switching between Spanish and English among students in her 5th-grade classroom. A European American teacher studied the dialect code-switching of African American students in her classroom. The final study focused on shifts in formal and informal speech styles within a university office. The group presentation and handout provided many examples and extensive information about code-switching for their colleagues.

Independent Field Projects

With new confidence following the small-groups studies, students select a focused study from a menu of possible studies exploring language variation, language learning, or discourse. In this inquiry study, each student develops in-depth understandings and expertise in a specific field or area of linguistics. The class is introduced to many areas of language study as projects are shared with colleagues. In addition to sharing finished projects, data-analysis workshops provide time for small groups to share (and for me to assist students with) resources, processes, and interpretations. The choice of an inquiry study also provides for differences in teaching levels (pre-K to high school), previous research experiences, backgrounds, and interests.

Students select a topic that interests them, puzzles them, or perhaps worries them. For example, one young mother was concerned because her son was labeled “language delayed” at 18 months; the basis for this was that he spoke infrequently and had only about 20 words in his speech repertoire. She videotaped her son interacting with family members and peers in various social contexts. Looking closely at Timothy’s language interactions, she found that he used language for five of Halliday’s (1975) eight social functions. In addition, his small number of “words” were resources for expressing a wide range of meanings depending on social function and context.

Students have examined commercial discourse by observing exchanges between staff and customers in a supermarket, bar, drug store, or jewelry store. One student looked at new language forms teenagers are developing in instant messaging. Another student compared greetings at her synagogue to greetings at the college library. Students have looked at conversations in many New York City/Long Island immigrant speech communities, including Irish, Spanish Queens, Haitian, Greek, and Italian. Classroom studies have focused on classroom discourse, second-language learners, or speakers of low-status dialects. Students also study language in literature, films, and TV shows, such as “My Cousin Vinny,” “Sweet Home Alabama,” “Fargo,” “Moesh,” and “The Sopranos.”

A Study of AAE Features of One Fifth-Grade Girl

Doreen Noone Wheeler’s study provides a specific example of how teachers might expand their linguistic knowledge base and challenge and refine their beliefs through language study. Doreen, a European American teacher, wanted to study African American English (AAE) in her classroom “because I work in a multicultural neighborhood and many of my students each year use this form of speaking. . . . Throughout my four years of teaching in a predominately African American and Hispanic community, I would continuously correct my students’ Black English during class time and even in the school yard. This whole way of speaking really bothered me, and I wanted my students to sound more educated. I felt like it was a reflection on me if I could not ‘improve’ their way of speaking.” Doreen
selected a student, Jasmine, as a focal student for her project “not only because she’s outgoing and personable, but mainly because she is constantly using Black English both inside and outside of the classroom.” Before the study, Doreen says, “My original hypothesis was that this girl used Black English in all situations and never deviated or code-switched, whether she was involved in either a formal or informal conversation. The other part of my hypothesis was that this form of speaking was holding her back and making her education suffer.”

European American teachers working in diverse communities often have little information about their students’ home communities and language backgrounds. It is common for teachers to report that all of their urban students speak Black English, which may be equated with the language of rap music. African American English may have an influence on the language of Hispanic students, but these are distinct communities.

A characteristic finding of sociolinguistic studies (i.e., Labov, 1972, and Wolfram, 1993) is that the occurrence of dialect features will vary depending on linguistic and social context. This is particularly true for stigmatized dialect features (for example, “ain’t”) that are characterized as “nonstandard” forms. When teachers look closely at firsthand data, they rediscover these sociolinguistic findings for themselves.

Doreen believed one taped conversation would provide sufficient examples of AAE features. She audiotaped a writing conference focusing on a poem Jasmine had written. Since writing conferences are a common speech event in Doreen’s classroom, this would provide a fairly authentic data sample. When Doreen listened to the tape, she was “kind of disappointed” because she did not hear any examples of AAE features. Doreen also found very few examples of AAE features in Jasmine’s writing. At this point, Doreen “started to think I was going crazy.” In her mind, she could hear “Jasmine’s loud voice” using AAE features throughout the day. She wondered, “Did she secretly figure out what I was studying for my class project?”

Characterization of a student’s language based on casual rather than systematic observations may color the teacher’s perceptions of the child’s actual language use. Noting some examples of AAE features in Jasmine’s language, the teachers perceives them as occurring all the time. When looking closely for identifiable phonological or grammatical variations, it’s common to find they occur much less frequently than predicted. More subtle variations, such as intonational rhythms and rhetorical patterns, may signal AAE usage and influence teacher expectations.

Doreen decided to collect more data, starting with a “casual interview, where I asked her friendly yet personal things you might discuss with a new friend.” Aside from calling her mother “moms,” Doreen still did not hear any identifiable features of AAE or informal English. Doreen then taped a conversation between Jasmine and an African American boy in her class, telling the two students “to just go ahead and talk among themselves about the class trip we had just gone on.” Doreen had to leave the room before the two students relaxed and began to speak casually, using some of the phonological and syntactic features of AAE. A few examples of AAE might be:

He be acting all gangsta.
She live in, like, a house.
We wasn’t yelling, we was talking.
Why you all don’t still go to Rye Playland no more?
We respected where we come from.

Doreen also noticed examples of informal spoken English common across American dialects, such as, “I’m gonna have fun,” and “This movie is kinda nasty.” This informal language further highlights Jasmine’s awareness—whether conscious or intuitive—that interactions with her teacher call for more formal English. Doreen concluded that, “Jasmine uses a colloquial dialect when she is speaking to her friends, working in a group, or when she is angry. However, when
speaking to me or another educator, she code-switches to what is considered standard dialect or ‘Proper English.’”

Doreen’s study also had an unexpected side-effect: “I have to say that I really learned a lot about Jasmine that I would never have known without doing this study.” Talking with Jasmine and analyzing her language influenced Doreen’s views of her student. She writes, “So basically we can see that my original hypothesis was wrong and that Jasmine does not use the Black English features in all settings. I also reject my initial ideas that all people that use Black English features are ignorant. Just from the conversations I had with Jasmine alone, both formal and informal, it is extremely apparent that Jasmine is anything but ignorant. In fact, she is a very bright child, especially in the reading and writing areas. She has a very creative mind that is always working.”

Doreen reflects, “I was not aware of code-switching or the fact that someone as young as fifth grade not only can do this but now also knows when to do this. I now look at my students in a different light with a newfound hope for their extended education.” In the future, Doreen will work to be a teacher “who doesn’t try to change my students’ language or dialect, but instead just helps them to understand when they should use it or not.”

**Reconsidering Language Learning and Teaching**

When teachers look closely at language samples, we discover things we may have overlooked. When we slow the talk down, we begin to question some of our beliefs and assumptions. And as we attempt to explain to ourselves what’s going on, we learn a lot about how children use language and how language develops. The studies we read from sociolinguistic researchers are more significant when we use them to inform our observations and understandings. Finally, we can bring those understandings to our teaching in order to best support children as meaning makers and as learners.

School phonics and grammar programs typically take a prescriptive stance. The goal is to get students to adopt a prescribed, idealized, standardized version of English determined (or scried) by the teacher, textbook, or program. Observing language in use challenges misconceptions about idealized “standard English,” as well as views of nonconventional English variations.

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Doreen’s study illustrates that initial perceptions and hunches about children’s language use are often inaccurate. When we look very closely at language in use—taking a descriptive stance—we come to appreciate the complexity and flexibility of children’s linguistic understandings and linguistic development. I believe the goal of teachers is to support language learning, recognizing that development and sophistication in the use of a variety of genres occurs over time and that conventional mistakes are a part of the process. Experiences in analyzing speaking, listening, reading, and writing in various genres and social contexts prompts teachers and children to consider the language styles and forms appropriate in particular settings. Social conventions vary if a writer is composing a rap song, a science report, a letter to the editor, a poem, a diary, an email, and so on. Similarly, process is a consideration—rough draft writing focusing on meaning rather than conventions.

Language pedagogy informed by linguistic study is additive rather than subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999). Children’s home language is a resource they bring to each new language experience (Ruiz, 1988), and young children, as well as English Language Learners, need opportunities to think and learn in their own language or dialect.

Studying language through the lens of linguistics changes the relationship between teachers and learners, whether in the college classroom or the elementary school classroom. High schools might have sociolinguistics courses that address language study from a descriptive linguistic stance. Teachers and children engaged in language inquiry
take on the role of expert speakers with knowledge to be shared rather than inadequate speakers with language forms to be subtracted (Valenzuela, 1999) or eradicated (Gilyard, 1991). These studies inform our teaching when children’s intuitive linguistic understandings and social uses of language are documented through direct observation and careful analysis.

As teachers gain knowledge of language diversity and pedagogy, teachers and students can become linguists together, investigating language functions and forms, exploring linguistic diversity,
and addressing linguistic stereotypes. Rather than teaching kids that “log” and “dog” rhyme, children might explore the “og” family (dog, log, frog, etc.), investigating which pairs rhyme or don’t rhyme in their home communities, and how these words are pronounced in other language communities. This kind of linguistic inquiry places phonemic awareness in a specific sociolinguistic context that addresses children’s extensive language knowledge while providing more accurate metalinguistic understandings than a “standard” phonics workbook is capable of describing.

Children’s intuitive linguistic understandings can become explicit when teachers and children study language together. Children observe and collect data, while teachers assist in interpretation and providing linguistic terminology. While exploring language, such as in McKissack’s (1986) Flossie and the Fox, sociocultural and sociopolitical issues will be raised and can be addressed directly. Children, like teachers, can come to see that all variations are rich means of expression, but some variations are privileged in our society.

Language study helps teachers to observe and document children’s language development, appreciate and support children’s outside-of-school language communities, develop pedagogy that supports language learning, and evaluate the validity of assumptions about language that underlie pedagogical programs and practices. Group inquiries, class discussions, and online “discussion boards” enhance learning experiences as knowledge and expertise is shared throughout the community and not just with the instructor. Engaging in language inquiry helps teachers tease out linguistic complexities, revise and refine their beliefs, and inform their own teaching with a greater awareness of how language matters in everyday life and learning.

**Author’s Note:** The list of possible independent studies used in class is built upon one used by James stalk-Er in a linguistics course at Michigan State University.

**References**


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