English teachers could teach and practice democracy in schools by addressing the many forms of the English language embraced by American democracy and beautifully illustrated in works by authors such as Mark Twain. Each form represents the best story we tell ourselves about the democracy we profess to be: everyone has a voice and every voice counts.

A narrow approach to language instruction has focused on inculcating standard forms of spoken and written English. Throughout the early phases of America’s public schooling, waves of immigrant children relied on their experiences in school to introduce them to their new country’s dominant language. Students who came to school with variant dialects were taught a standard form of English typically framed as “correct” and thought of as “pure.” Variant dialects represented corruptions or degradations to be extirpated for the benefit of individual speakers and for the purity of the language. And this teaching of what has been called Standard English was seen as a noble enterprise intended to help all students move beyond limitations sure to be imposed on those speaking other languages and variant dialects of English. Historically, then, teaching Standard English has been simultaneously motivated by a democratic impulse to provide students with greater opportunities and an authoritarian impulse to maintain the purity of the language, creating a tension of purpose that remains with us today.

One function of education in the United States is to provide students with a common experience that enables them to communicate outside of their communities—to navigate the “language of wider communication,” a term originating in NCTE’s “National Language Policy.” However, an uncritical embrace of Standard English induces its own tensions: delineating what is meant by Standard English and defending what makes it “better,” denigrating students’ dialect while praising its use in literature, and ignoring the implications of replacing a variant dialect with a standard form. In this article, we intend to clarify what is at stake in teaching Standard English.
English and the role dialects could play in more effectively teaching it. We suggest general principles and specific strategies for respecting the language of students’ homes while helping them gain a mastery of Standard English, with students’ right to both being essential to the democracy our nation proclaims through its commitment to public education.

What Is Standard English?

There may be no such thing as Standard English, at least in a spoken form. The authors of Dialects in Schools and Communities note that speakers from different parts of the country use different dialects, all of which are considered “standard” in their region. “[A] number of different varieties qualify as informal Standard English. For example, a standard speaker from Maine and a standard speaker from Tennessee would have quite different pronunciation patterns and probably certain other differences as well” (Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 16). “Standard English is a collection of the socially preferred dialects from various parts of the United States and other English-speaking countries” (17). Instruction in spoken Standard English varies across the country and the world, adjusting to fit the speech patterns of its speakers who, at least locally, are perceived as among the most prestigious and powerful in their communities.

The boundaries of written Standard English are less fluid but, as the authors of Grammar Alive! remind readers, “Standard English” is a concept with some flexibility to it. It has its gray areas” (Hausammen et al. 5). It is clear to most people that speakers of nondominant dialects do need to become proficient in standard forms of written and spoken English to gain access to power and prestige. What is most at issue is keeping democratic principles intact while questioning why and how that might best be accomplished.

Is Standard English Better?

Attempts to teach Standard English are frequently plagued by misconceptions and half-truths that turn what should be an empowering learning experience into an oppressive and alienating one for all speakers. One pervasive mistake is the belief that standard forms of English are simply better: more logical, more accurate, more articulate in communicating an objective reality. This belief underlies various common “prohibitions,” such as the double negative (because logically one negative “cancels out” the other) and the adverb hopefully (on the grounds that expressions such as “Hopefully, she will win the race” make no sense, as one cannot act in a hopeful manner). Such tight strictures ignore linguistic facts: the common use of the double (or multiple) negative form in many languages—for example, the ne...pas construction in French—and the shared understanding of certain adverb forms that otherwise transgress logic. Strictly speaking, Rhett Butler couldn’t be said to “frankly” not give a damn, either. While similar uses are allowed, hopefully is an outcast for unclear reasons.

Linguists agree that Standard English is not inherently “better” than other dialects (Andrews; Pinker; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian). Standard English, to the degree there is such a thing, did not emerge because it was a thing of beauty, precision, and grace; it is a form of English that became a standard because it codifies how the rich and powerful talk. Hence Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly’s observation in An Unquiet Pedagogy: Transforming Practice in the English Classroom, “[H]istorically some dialects became dominant because they were spoken by those who held wealth and power.... Where the speakers of one regional dialect gain wealth and power and privilege, their dialect soon becomes the ‘privileged’ one—the one that others seeking wealth and power will come to use” (69). Standard English functions as a gatekeeping device to social and economic gain. The unspoken assumption that nonstandard dialects are “degradations” of a standard is simply wrong, a myth promulgated by self-appointed language mavens who have often not examined their linguistic prejudices.

Dialect and Identity

It is profoundly wrong, even harmful, to misrepresent Standard English as intrinsically superior to other dialects. In addition to being inaccurate, this claim devalues the language spoken by individual students and those in their communities. Teaching language differs from many academic disciplines...
because language is intrinsically rooted in the identity of speaker and community and, similarly, in our identity as a democratic society. To approach a particular language form as “less” devalues its speakers. This claim, which may strike some readers as radical, is actually fundamental to the language positions formulated by the National Council of Teachers of English.\(^1\) The most compelling formulation of NCTE’s position on language was articulated by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in the resolution “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” which was adopted as a policy in 1974:

>We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (1)

An updated version of the “National Language Policy” extended the focus of the resolution to include dialect and second languages:

>Be it resolved that CCCC members promote the National Language Policy adopted at the Executive Committee meeting on March 16, 1988. This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. To provide resources to enable native and non-native speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.

2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in one’s mother tongue will not be lost.

3. To foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language. (par. 2)

These policy statements may seem irrelevant to teachers who are facing increasing pressure from state standards of learning and standardized testing; the new SAT, for example, will include sections on identifying sentence and paragraph errors that may cause many teachers to revert to traditional grammar instruction. But such policies represent carefully considered positions based on solid research and years of teaching experience, and they should provide a standard for English teachers in the original sense of the word \textit{standard}: “The ‘standard’ was originally the flag that soldiers rallied around, the source of self-orientation and loyalty; it represented what mattered, what one was willing to fight for” (Wiggins 48). In American democracy, diversity has been a source of national strength and innovation, and this observation is as true linguistically as it is economically and politically. We must find a balance between giving all students access to the language of power and affirming individual expressions of powerful language.

Non-Standard English and American Literature

In addition to the argument for respecting variant forms of English based on social equity, there is a compelling argument based on the study of American literature, central to virtually all English language arts programs in the United States. Dialect is fundamental to the study of American literature because the essential American issues at the heart of the democratic argument we have with ourselves as a nation—of race and class—are often most powerfully articulated by how characters speak and write. Complementing these thematic imperatives, there exists a tradition of American writers using the vernacular to express what they see as emerging truths about their country. Taking momentum from European Romantics who championed the epiphanies of common people living ordinary lives, American writers embraced distinctive local voices to communicate the American experience. In their quest to forge a unique national identity, American writers reached to the language of the common person.

Walt Whitman, America’s unofficial poet laureate, was one linguistic pioneer who embraced informal American speech, the slang and expressions
brimming with energy and an emerging national identity: “Language...i s  something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground” (qtd. in Andrews 33). Continuing in this vein, Henry David Thoreau similarly claimed in his journals that “the first requisite and rule is that expression shall be vital and natural”: “The grammarian is often one who can neither cry nor laugh, yet thinks that he can express human emotions. So the posture-masters tell you how you shall walk,—turning your toes out, perhaps, excessively,—but so the beautiful walkers are not made” (2 Jan. 1859). Perhaps most famously, Mark Twain also discovered unimagined poetic power in the informal, uneducated American vernacular, and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, told through the voice of an uneducated, poor boy, is a linguistically revolutionary work that taps the potential of common speech and “poor grammar” to communicate moral and aesthetic insights with astonishing beauty and power. The tradition of using dialect and vernacular to express the many faces and sounds of American democracy continues through the works of such writers as Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison.

As English teachers, we must ask ourselves about our openness to unfamiliar forms of language. How are we helping students to find their voices, not just to imitate ours?

The point is emphatically not that we should ignore Standard English and “teach” students their dialects, whatever that would mean. But all meaningful learning begins with what students know, and the study of American literature should tap into students’ experiences with language. From there, students can and should be introduced to Standard English as an alternative and useful in-common dialect whose forms they will be expected to master. Students must be able to select language appropriate for the occasion and avoid being socially penalized for inappropriate choices.

**Negotiating Dialect and Standard English in the Classroom**

How might English teachers approach issues of dialect and non-Standard English use in their classrooms? (See sidebar for three important instructional principles.) The most important point is that language study should begin with the language children bring to school; otherwise, attempts to teach Standard English may fail, either because teachers misunderstand the students’ communication or they imply that what feels natural to students is invariably wrong. Schools have traditionally treated a non-standard home language as “a liability to [student] learning, something to be dismissed or erased before school learning can take place” (Kutz and Roskelly 57), the result being that “children from other cultures, who may bring ways of knowing that are radically different from the ways the educational system has promoted...are silenced in their classrooms” (51). Often, such silence results from our ignorance: “Patterns of verbal participation that have been learned in the cultural context of the home community may account for much of children’s interaction in the classroom. This behavior is often misinterpreted by those who do not share the cultural background of the children” (Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 88). Native American children, for example, are commonly labeled “passive” because the conversational framework of home does not promote asking questions of adults (Erickson and Mohatt; Philips). In a landmark study, Labov showed that verbal skill prized in many African American communities is quelled in a school system that does not value an oral tradition “[b]ecause it’s not understood and not valued, it’s not used or encouraged in the classroom, and an effective connection is never made to the language style and uses of the school culture” (Kutz and Roskelly 68). In fact, Labov’s detailed study of an adolescent African American male’s language use showed it to be linguistically more clear and complex than that of an upper-class African American college graduate, whose use of standard forms resulted in verbose, anxious, and imprecise expressions. Such studies suggest the limitations of any attempt to teach a school dialect before adequately valuing the dialect of home as a linguistic resource.

The study of variant and Standard English has the potential to be incredibly rich for teachers and...
students. In her groundbreaking work *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, Shirley Brice Heath describes the language exploration that followed the desegregation of schools in two communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. She wrote of teachers who helped students see the difference between home language and school language, not to extirpate their dialects but to teach them to move between the two systems. Heath argues that this education enriched both sets of verbal skills by making the underlying rules of each dialect explicit. She explains:

Students could not escape recognizing and having to articulate the differences in language structure, uses of language, and types of interactional cooperation which existed between their familiar domains and the unfamiliar domains of the classroom and other institutions calling for formal language use. . . . Making explicit the rules of each system became possible through active involvement in experiencing how facts are known and how they can be built from bits of information into structures carrying more information. . . . Teachers felt that the attention given to different ways of talking and knowing, and the manipulation of contexts and language benefited all students. (355)

A rich teaching strategy using Heath’s approach suggests extending student study of native dialects to understand how dialect traditions have enriched American speech. Eliot Wigginton’s Foxfire projects provide a model for students going out into their communities, to document dialect speakers as a way to promote language awareness and preserve local language history. Students can then discover patterns and “[d]evelop hypotheses about the linguistic context in which the form occurs” (43). Projects such as these would dramatize how verbal traditions, exemplified by Black English Vernacular (BEV), have profoundly influenced American culture through jazz, poetry, and public rhetoric, and the projects would provide explorations of variant dialects that can help students understand authors’ artful and sophisticated language choices in shaping stories and novels.

The extensive use of dialect throughout American literature makes it clear that there are speakers of every dialect who use language brilliantly as well as others who use language woodenly, even deceptively. How sad it is that the primary casualty of the war between linguists and traditional grammarians has been the study of English in school, which is now avoided by many English teachers who are afraid to teach Standard English and unsure how to handle such controversial issues as dialect. And how ironic it is that so many students who use language dynamically outside of school sit silently inside its walls, reluctant to step into a language territory they have

Eliot Wigginton’s Foxfire projects provide a model for students going out into their communities, tape recorder and notepad in hand, to document dialect speakers as a way to promote language awareness and preserve local language history.

THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

> Teachers should not equate grammar (descriptive language rules) with usage (how a group of speakers actually uses language). This can be particularly difficult because so many textbooks do not draw a clear distinction between grammar and usage. Students need to understand that analyzing how a language works—that is, its “rules”—is different from observing how various dialects of English depart from those rules and, in doing so, create their own rules.

> Instruction in Standard English should emerge from teachers’ and students’ shared understanding and appreciation of the dialect of home and community. The objective should be for students to gain mastery in yet another dialect (Standard English), not to replace the language of home.

> Standard English instruction should not occur through decontextualized exercises. In fact, research shows that “there is no convincing evidence that drilling supports learning” (Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 124); further, “vernacular speakers who were corrected when they used vernacular features actually used more, not fewer, vernacular features over time” (122–23). There is now a solid body of literature offering alternatives to traditional drill, Constance Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context* and its companion text, *Lessons to Share on Teaching Grammar in Context*, edited by Weaver, being among the most comprehensive.
come to perceive as a minefield. We need to balance our mission to introduce Standard English with a respect for the language of students’ homes and communities, and we must remain open to the power of the many different forms of English to convey new insights and birth original ideas.

If there exists a tension between the democratic impulse to include everyone’s voice and the authoritarian impulse to promote a standard form of English, we need not understand that tension as a conflict to be resolved but as a source of creative and generative possibilities in which rich experiences in the exploration of dialect serve as a precursor to mastering Standard English. To that end, we offer the following teaching suggestions, among the most generative of those we practice in our classrooms.

Specific Teaching Suggestions

Our goals are to help students develop flexibility and options in their choices of expression, to read social contexts accurately, and to shift their language for particular audiences and purposes. These dialect explorations enrich instruction in Standard English, providing insights into the way language works. We use them in our classrooms to open up the territory of Standard English and its variant dialects, beginning with activities that anchor language exploration in students’ lives and moving outward from there to other texts.

1. Turning the spirit of Foxfire toward themselves, students can create a linguistic autobiography by researching their linguistic roots, for example, the meaning of their given names, the lineage in their surnames, and the story of how they were named and by whom, eventually broadening their investigation to their family, their names, their idiosyncratic speech patterns, the "sayings" that identify them, and the features that make them a part of their unique speech community.

2. Deepening the focus on the social aspects that influence language behaviors, students can write personal narratives that tell the story of a formative experience when they became aware of race, class, or gender differences and then analyze their stories for the role played by language in those experiences.

3. Read aloud in class literary selections written in dialect and listen to recordings of passages written in dialect. This basic suggestion can eliminate much of the confusion for students who are bewildered by dialect, from Dickens’s Cockney speech to variations of American dialect, that may otherwise remain silent to them in print.

4. Compare various literary interpretations of a particular dialect. Black English Vernacular is represented by many writers, from Twain to Morrison. How do different writers represent the speech of African Americans through phonetic spelling and variant grammar? Whose version seems most accurate? One particularly interesting exercise is to include a poor example of dialect writing, such as the beginning of the Sherlock Holmes mystery "The Adventure of the Three Gables," which includes an absurdly inaccurate rendition of Black English Vernacular, and contrast it with a selection from Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, or Zora Neale Hurston.

5. Create skits in which one person tries to communicate with a group using a dialect inappropriate to the situation. A person interviewing for a job speaking a nonstandard dialect might be contrasted with a young person who speaks only formal, Standard English at a Def Poetry Jam performance. For this exercise, it is important to make sure that variant dialects not be imitated by those who do not know those dialects, to avoid stereotyped and offensive representations.

6. Rewrite literary passages written in dialect using Standard English. Discuss what is changed or lost in translation. Clips from the film Lost in Translation might provide a backdrop for this work by showing how we can get lost in cultural and linguistic differences, even isolated and made lonely by them, if we fail to use the unfamiliar to teach us more about ourselves and each other.

7. Engage students in describing the grammatical rule systems for their dialect and then comparing and contrasting these systems with those of Standard English. Students
Democracy, Dialect, and the Power of Every Voice

may discover that their dialects allow for some forms of subtle communication impossible in Standard English and, in the process, they can also gain a greater appreciation for some of the benefits of a standard form of the language.

Inviting Students into the Democratic Conversation

If we are to release the power in students’ voices, we must widen the path of language instruction. We gain nothing by teaching language as though students had none, using that as our rationale for imposing the sanctioned forms of the socially elite. Rather, we must invite students into the democratic conversation where a critique of language use can occur. Legitimating the entire linguistic repertoire of students can be a powerful point of departure for cultivating the multiple communication skills needed to participate fully in an increasingly diverse society where, as Clifford Geertz reminds us, “the person we encounter in the grocery store is as likely, or nearly, to them as we fulfill our responsibility to teach language.”

Coast, Iranian physicians in the Midwest” (121). It is one’s ability to communicate in such a multilingual population that ultimately makes democracy possible. Our best authors command a broad range of dialects and registers. We can apprentice students to them as we fulfill our responsibility to teach language in ways that enable full civic participation, no matter what uncertainties that may produce for us. In that enterprise, we can view dialect as an opportunity or an obstacle. The former requires the greater amount of courage, but hasn’t that always been the way in which democracy evolves? Think of the process as one of those “regular summer storms” Huck Finn describes:

It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; . . . rain . . . thick and spider-webby; . . . a blast of wind that would bend the trees down . . . a perfect ripper of a gust . . . branches . . . tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was about the bluest and blackest—fist! It was bright as glory.

Bright as glory.

Notes


2. This study, along with numerous others by Labov, is discussed in Geneva Smitherman’s Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America, still one of the most comprehensive portrayals and pedagogically useful discussions of Black English.

Works Cited


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**National Media Education Conference (NMEC) 2005**

Online registration is now available for the largest, oldest, and most broad-based gathering of media literacy educators in the United States—the National Media Education Conference 2005, June 25–28 in San Francisco, California.

Attendees will explore why what looks like many media choices is actually few media voices—and what can be done about it—during more than seventy-five conference events, including keynotes, workshops, preconference seminars, special interest caucuses, and more.

This year’s theme is “Giving Voice to a Diverse Nation.” Through NMEC, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) is calling for Americans to explore whether our media truly represent and serve citizens of all ages, genders, ethnicities, abilities, and incomes—and to find solutions in media literacy. Featured speakers include David Buckingham, Alan November, Gloria Tristani, Kenneth Smith, Carlos Cortes, Ronald Takaki, and many more.

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We are beginning to recognize that the salvation of our republic hangs upon the ability of the ordinary man to think. And he must think more swiftly, deeply, and extensively than ever the forefathers thought. Moreover, what he thinks he must be able clearly to say.