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

A teacher researcher describes how she invited her students to be detectives on the lookout for language and to take a critical perspective on how it varies with each speaker, purpose, and context.

“I sometimes use words or phrases from cartoons, books, TV, and other people in my conversations because when I do it grabs the attention of my friends. They’d go ‘oh yea’ or ‘I know that.’” (Lauren)

“Personally, I think that people use other people’s voices or quotes to put themselves on a similar status of that person. When Apollo 13 was showing, I noticed that a lot of people were saying, ‘Houston, we have a problem.’ In my opinion, the people were saying that to elevate their rank to the actor’s.” (Derek)

“Everyday people use language to get power by interjecting in a conversation and then talking for long periods of time. People also use sarcasm to gain power. Also, you have to use other people’s words and talk about ‘in things.’” (Mia)

These are just a few entries from sixth graders’ language-detective logs. As a class, we were always on the lookout for language—exploring how and why we use language in certain situations and with particular people, investigating how language is used to confer or deny power, and considering the many voices that we adopt as speakers and writers. In the spirit of Heath (1983), we studied “ways with words” by documenting, discussing, and reflecting on language use in school, at home, and within the young adult novels that we read throughout the year. To conduct our small-scale ethnographies of language, we used a variety of qualitative research methods, such as audiotaping classroom conversations, interviewing peers and parents, and writing field notes, observations, and literary responses in our detective logs.
By instructing sixth graders to be on the lookout for language, and particularly for how it varies with each speaker, purpose, and context, I hoped to promote a richer and more robust view of language diversity. 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. As Bakhtin (1981) suggests, language is heteroglossic, or composed of many voices. Moreover, the numerous voices or literacies within a single utterance is a simple fact of language (Bakhtin, 1981). 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.

**Appreciating Language Diversity: Being “On the Lookout for Language”**

Hoping to enlarge sixth graders’ understanding of language diversity, I created an instructional strand in my curriculum called “On the Lookout for Language.” Although I continued to recruit students as language detectives, I am reporting on only our work from the first year, 1995–1996, in this article. Teaching at Rockford Upper Elementary School in central New Jersey (names have been changed throughout to protect student anonymity), I worked with a heterogeneously grouped class of 25 students. The social, cultural, and racial composition of my class varied from year to year, but in 1995–1996 it reflected the district’s student population: 76 percent White, 5 percent African American, 18 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 percent Hispanic students. Although this once rural, agrarian community has become more diverse, it is nonetheless predominantly white and upper middle class.

Given this homogeneity, it was important for me to raise students’ awareness that every “utterance is an embodiment of speech diversity” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271). By urging sixth graders to study their own behaviors as language users, I hoped that they would come to understand how local literacies applied to them and not simply to “others” from different social classes, races, and ethnicities. And much like Freire and Macedo (1987), 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.

Thus, as language ethnographers, these sixth graders and I investigated the “primordial properties” of language and, in so doing, examined instances—both within and beyond the classroom—where language was heteroglossic, elastic, and historically, politically, and socially constructed, as well as ideologically charged (Bakhtin, 1981). What follows is an account of the instructional activities I created for the purpose of raising sixth graders’ critical language awareness and, in turn, their appreciation of language diversity as a fact of language (Fairclough, 1989, 1992).

**Language as Elastic and Heteroglossic: A Visit with Kate Bloomfield**

To begin our language study, I presented Jean Little’s (1990) poem “Today” because it vividly and humorously illustrates the two properties of language—elasticity and heteroglossia—that I wanted students to explore and understand. The poem is delivered in the voice of 14-year-old Kate Bloomfield, a character from Little’s other novels. Young Kate declares: “Today I will not live up to my potential. / Today I will not relate well with my peer group” (p. 6). When discussing these lines, students and I first considered why the poem made us laugh and what was so funny about Kate’s expressions. We discovered that Kate’s declaration was humorous mostly because she took adult ways with words and used them as tools to fashion her own rebellion. With this example, I highlighted the fact that Kate, a writer close to my students’ own age, was actually an ingenious tactician when selecting her words for her own subversive ends. She poached adult language and inhabited those voices that typically encroached upon her (Diamondstone, 1999).

This mini-lesson showed sixth graders that language can be elastic, supple, and even responsive to their touch (Bakhtin, 1981; Hymes, 1973). Kate, after all, manipulated the seemingly fixed speech codes of adults to achieve humor and creative resistance. Given Kate’s example, I encouraged students to imagine how they too could pinch,
press, and pull language according to their own intentions. 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 (Bakhtin, 1981). I pointed out how even the phrase “live up to your potential” carries the voices of Kate’s parents, teachers, older siblings, and Kate herself.

To fully convey this idea, I created a scenario of Kate performing as a ventriloquist and asked students to imagine a teacher or parent sitting upon Kate’s lap as a puppet, mouthing the phrases “live up to my potential” and “relate well with my peer group.” We dramatized teacher talk and playfully parodied that speech style. We brainstormed other adult phrases and had fun mocking the various authority figures in our lives. We also asked ourselves if we had ever used those same phrases (e.g., “accept responsibility” and “be appropriate”) either jokingly or seriously. We then explored why and questioned our own purposes for doing so. As students explained, “I’ve seen kids do it in front of the teacher to suck up,” “I would only say that stuff to get back at my parents,” and “I might write something saying it because it was ‘cool’ and ‘da bomb’ because it was the new thing and people were just saying it because it was ‘cool’ and

We were on the lookout for how we perform as ventriloquists by taking words out of other peoples’ mouths and using them for our own purposes.

In subsequent lessons, we were on the lookout for how we perform as ventriloquists by taking words out of other peoples’ mouths and using them for our own purposes. For example, we considered the expressions “da bomb” and “phat” more closely. I asked students to think about why they used such phrases—to be cool, to gain peer acceptance, or to rebel. On this point Ally offered, “I used to use the words ‘phat’ and ‘da bomb’ because it was the new thing and people were just saying it because it was ‘cool’ and
new. But now it’s old and not so cool, just like those PTA people.”

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.” I made a point of challenging students to find out if they had used others’ voices in their essays. After mining their texts for others’ voices, students offered observations such as, “I used Martin Luther King, Jr.’s quote because I liked it a lot. If you don’t use quotes or different voices, something is missing. I think they just make your essay a complete package of your thoughts and other people’s thoughts,” and “These kinds of voices help you sound grown up and mature so people take you seriously, like in our letter to the principal.”

Park Bench Language Detectives

As part of our language studies, we also played an impromptu performance game called Park Bench throughout the year. The game starts with one student sitting on a hypothetical park bench (which in our case was the read-aloud couch), whereupon another student enters the scene and begins talking, “Please get me a cup of coffee and report immediately to my office for a dictation.” On cue, the first student must respond appropriately to the context created by the second student’s remarks. They continue to play their roles and alter their strategies for participation. In time, a third student enters the scene and, with his or her statement, changes the whole context and, by extension, the roles and linguistic performances of the other two actors. I used Park Bench for fun and for the express purpose of encouraging sixth graders to be detectives of language (Heath, 1983). After the actual performances, we discussed the idea that students automatically know how to switch codes and to adjust registers in order to make each new scene work. In these debriefing sessions, I tried to show students that they adopted many voices and varied those voices according to the different scenarios and the changing relationships with their fellow actors. Even more, I wanted students to realize just how versatile and agile they were as language users. I encouraged them to see how they could wield language effectively as a means of gaining and maintaining access to the ongoing exchange. For example, some students adopted the dialect or particular speech styles related to their roles; others (who entered the scene) created new contexts by changing the language patterns and initiating new discourse. And in response, others then had to take up this new way of talking to stay in the scene.

In these Park Bench conversations, I encouraged students to make connections to their own lives in school and at home and to consider how they used language in similar ways. What follows is an excerpt from a transcript of one such conversation that occurred on April 11, 1996:

**Students use expressions from shared experiences of popular culture to show that they are “in the know.”**

**Teacher:** Ok . . . let me ask you to think about how in your own conversations you uh . . . take on a different voice or a different style of speaking. For example, I can only go from myself. I would certainly not talk to you all the way I talk with my niece who’s two. I wouldn’t be like ‘oh, lovie, lovie, cutie,’ right? Why not?

**Naohiro:** ’Cause we’re older.

**Teacher:** Right . . . what do you think?

**Shaundrika:** People, like, do it all the time without even noticing it. When you’re around different people . . . like, I could be around Justine and talk one way, and then I could be around you [the teacher] and talk like I’m older.

**Teacher:** So . . . you’re hanging out, you’re doing the friend kinda’ talk with Justine. Then, all of a sudden, Ms. P. walks in and you shift a little . . .

**Shaundrika:** To sound mature, you know.

**Adam:** Well, in a sense, all of our speech is a facade because for different people we adjust to what we know they can relate to . . . um . . . it’s not just a facade . . . probably just a courtesy or a way of being with other people.

**Laura:** Well, with my grandparents I talk slow and loud and I can’t use big words.

**Teacher:** Why do you think you do that?

**Laura:** Well, it’s polite . . . it helps them understand what I’m saying.

**Ricky:** Well, my grandmother . . . sometimes it’s hard for her to understand me because she doesn’t speak a lotta’ English.

**Teacher:** Do you speak Spanish with her then?

**Ricky:** No . . . inglés. [The students break into laughter because Ricky doesn’t speak Spanish.]
As this conversation and others over the years have shown me, 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).

How Language Is Shaped by Historical, Social and Political Forces

I created lessons to highlight the fact that language itself is often what is at stake in power struggles (Fairclough, 1989). Specifically, I explained how 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. As a case in point, I described how in ancient times students were trained to deliver arguments wherein they established their credibility by invoking noted authorities on the subject at hand; their personal opinions were strongly discouraged because they didn't carry the same clout as the master's words; and any discourse that departed from this tradition was condemned as idle chat or silly gossip (Connors, 1987). The writer (generally a man at this time) would be dismissed, and as a result, his general use of the pronoun in question. We discovered that essays seemed to always have some mix

I asked students, “Who makes up the rules of the language game and decides which words live and die?”

of fact and opinion, that the writers occasionally used I to be ironic or self-deprecating, and that experts made first-person references. The more articles we collected and examined, the more we realized that I was used by many authors and in many different ways to achieve a wide range of effects. In the end, we decided, I was a tool we'd list on our Essay Tool Box bulletin board because, as students pointed out, this little pronoun was a way to “show you had a similar experience to back up what you’re saying,” to make sure “your own opinions aren’t treated like dirt,” to “be myself... and to be known for who I am,” and to “get respect by showing and not hiding what you really think.”

We then examined other language forms—dialects and slang, for example—that are also carefully monitored in formal, school-based speaking and writing. When we were studying contractions, I raised the issue that ain’t, a once popular and acceptable word, has since fallen out of favor and is no longer used. Likewise, I explained how ain’t is heavily policed and widely denounced as inappropriate. In discussing these two terms, we explored how and why they had met such fates. I asked students, “Who makes up the rules of the language game and decides which words live and die?” Students responded that their parents, teachers, and the board of education established these laws in order to “keep kids in their
place.” I reminded them that we would need to consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* to find out about the life story of these words. After doing so, we realized that local authority figures (e.g., our teachers, parents, and board members) were following, rather than creating, these language conventions. They stood in a long line of people who agreed to accept and maintain the status of *amn’t* and *ain’t*.

In the context of this study of contractions, we also explored the social purposes behind language forms, noting that speakers contract words for efficiency’s sake and that writers might put contractions in their texts to establish a more informal and conversational tone. We focused again on the *ain’t* taboo, discussing how 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.

With this line of inquiry, I hoped to 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.

Andrew Clements’s (1996) novel *Frindle* illustrates this very point by dramatizing how linguistic forms don’t just magically materialize but are in fact created and later adopted because of social convention. In this story, fifth-grader Nick decides to test the idea that “every person who has ever spoken or written in English has had a hand in making” the dictionary (p. 20). So one day he coins a new word for pen, *frindle*, and mobilizes all of his classmates and every student in his school to use this new term. Mrs. Granger, his teacher (the high priestess of dictionaries large and small), mounts a campaign against *frindle*, pitting students and teachers against one another in a bitter contest that gains national attention. Nick even goes on the *David Letterman Show* to promote his cause, while local opportunists mass-produce *frindle*

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The story concludes when Nick is a junior in college and his word is officially added to the dictionary. That year, he receives a letter that Mrs. Granger has written in the midst of the controversy years earlier. In the letter, she writes:

> The word *frindle* has existed for less than three weeks. I now see that this is the kind of chance that a teacher hopes and dreams about—a chance to see bright young students take an idea they have learned in a boring old classroom and put it to a real test in their own world. I confess that I am very excited to see how it all turns out. I am mostly here to watch it happen. But somehow I think I have a small part to play in this drama, and I have chosen to be the villain. Every good story needs a bad guy, don’t you think? So someday, I will be asking you to forgive me, and I hope you will. (p. 99)

I asked students what it takes for new words or new rules to be formed. We discussed the idea that many people have to agree to use the word or rule in the first place. It is by convention or social agreement, I explained, that some words or rules live and others die. I also pressed students to consider what role Mrs. Granger played throughout the whole process. As a villain, she fueled Nick’s drive and thereby kept *frindle*’s momentum going. Students then wrote in response to the following prompt: “What did Nick’s experience teach you about language—words or rules—in general?”

We discussed these written responses, and students made the following conclusions:

- **Language rules are really just made up by people and like I wanna’ create a new punctuation mark that you can throw in to show you know it’s probably a run-on sentence but you’re not sure why.**

- **I think you might be able to make up stuff in poetry but you can’t do what Nick did in essays really.**

- **Well, that lady who wrote that magazine article about learning how to fly airplanes . . . she um . . . used a fragment in her essay to show how scared she was.**

- **You gotta’ want things to change, though, and you sort of have to go against other people like your teachers. Your parents and your friends would have to be on your side like with Nick, you know.**

From the novel itself and their conversations with classmates, these
sixth graders had begun to develop an understanding of the inner workings of language and of what it might mean for them to risk what Nick did.

Extending our investigation of these particular language issues, we went on the lookout for etymologies while reading Evslin’s (1969) version of *Ulysses*. I relied on Kaye’s (1985) *Word Works*, which explicitly addresses the idea that many words from Greece and Rome have been adopted by the English language. Kaye (1985) offers examples of biographies of several words; however, I found that students enjoyed creating their own stories about how certain words came to be and later comparing their versions with those offered in *Word Works*. Moreover, such an exercise revealed students’ understanding of etymologies and of the various forces and factors that influence a given word’s trajectory. Specifically, we talked about the word *clue*, and students composed accounts of how this term had evolved. Then, I presented the actual tale that clue comes from the Middle English word *clewe*, which refers to the silk string that Theseus used to find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Interestingly, students preferred their own etymologies, arguing that these life stories were often more interesting, funny, and dramatic. With these word-study exercises, I tried to make the point that language is living, changing, and responsive rather than fixed, finite, and immutable.

**Language as a Site of Struggle for Power**

Finally, we investigated the political dimensions of language throughout our author study of Mildred D. Taylor. During our read-aloud of Taylor’s shorter pieces, *The Gold Cadillac* (1987) and *The Friendship* (1987), we noted how people use language to subordinate others and thereby to maintain social inequities. In *The Friendship*, racial tensions brought on by segregation escalate when Mr. Tom Bee, a spirited but aged African American, addresses longtime friend and white storeowner John Wallace by his first name. Although Bee saved Wallace’s life many years ago, and the two men share a special bond, Wallace insists that Bee only use his first name during private conversations. However, Bee ignores Wallace’s conditions and yells “John! John! John! Till the judgment day! John!” in the owner’s crowded general

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**Students Making a Difference**

The following books contain specific ideas for students who want to take action and make a difference in the world:

- Editors of Fairview Press. *How We Made the World a Better Place: Kids and Teens Write on How They Changed Their Corner of the World*. Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 1998. Students describe the work they do to make a difference in the world. Several selections are by students who were inspired by their teachers or are about groups within school contexts.


- Patricia O. Giggan & Barrie Levy. *50 Ways to a Safer World: Everyday Actions You Can Take to Prevent Violence in Neighborhoods, Schools, and Communities*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1997. This guide provides suggested actions for personal safety, safety in homes and communities, and safety on the streets, some of which are appropriate for students.

- Westridge Young Writers Workshop. *Kids Explore America’s Hispanic Heritage*. New York: Norton, 1992. Eighty-two students wrote a book about Hispanic culture from their point of view. The book can be used to encourage students to take action by inquiring into their own heritage and by sharing what they learn through publication.

—Roxanne Henkin
store (p. 45), to which Wallace replies: “But this here disrespentin’ me gotta stop and I mean to stop it now. You gotta learn to address me proper. You hear me, Tom?” (p. 45).

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To back up his words with force, Wallace then shoots Bee in the leg. Horrified by the bloody outcome of the men’s dispute, students were mystified as to why Wallace would resort to such extreme measures. I made the point that language played an invisible role throughout the book to maintain the supposed superiority of whites. We noted, for example, how many African American men were belittled by the term boy.

The system of segregation, I explained, gave rise to such demeaning expressions, which, in turn, reinforced those prejudicial attitudes.

After tracking down similar instances in the novel in which whites used language to undermine African American characters, we returned to Bee, who deployed language as a means of resisting segregation and the subordinate role that such a system had assigned him. With each “John!” that he fired from his lungs, Bee condemned Wallace and the social order until “there was no other sound” in the store or on the street (p. 47). I thought it was significant that the story ended with only Bee’s voice ringing loud and clear. I asked students to address the following question in their reading journals: “What does this story teach you about how language is used in the world?”

I also challenged students to explain any situations where they or others used language to gain or fight against power. Karim, for example, offered, “The last time I recall using language to show power was during my I-Search presentation. I said that...”

CONCLUSIONS

Honoring local literacies and valuing all students’ funds of language resources can prove problematic, particularly if all we have to guide us are good intentions. Without a broader view of language diversity, we run some of the same risks that many multicultural education programs have over the years. That is, we may find ourselves hosting a literacy fair of sorts and spotlighting a given language variety as the feature presentation of the day. Although such an approach seems to be far better than ignoring or dismissing language diversity altogether, it can have the unintended effect of casting local literacies as spectacles or side shows—detours from our main instruction. 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.

Alternatively, we would do well to draw on those theories of language that afford more inclusive views of language diversity itself. There is great power and possibility, for example, in Bakhtin’s (1981) claim that a single utterance holds multiple voices—multiple ways of acting, interacting, valuing, knowing, and being. Finding real-world illustrations of this or other related properties of language (e.g., in Jean Little’s poem, the Park Bench game, or young adult novels such as Frindle and The Friendship) is a small step in the direction of broadening and deepening our study of the literacies within and beyond our schools’ walls.

Still, 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 (New London Group, 1996).

Moreover, 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. This view of competence is one offered by Hymes (1973) and later elaborated by Cazden (1996). According to Cazden, competence involves being apPROpriate (e.g., knowing and producing language that is grammatically acceptable and appropriate to the situation), as well as being able to appropriATe—to adopt and adapt language, selectively and strategically, for one’s particular communicative purposes. 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. The pronoun I, for example, is both taboo and a resource. Likewise, the voices of authority figures can be appropriated and ventriloquized for subversive ends. Moreover, a single word such as John can be an act of resistance and self-education.

For Hymes (1973), competence is more than grammatical know-how; it involves some degree of resourcefulness and even gameness—being aware of the rules of the game but also being plucky enough to re-imagine such obligations as options and to deploy those resources, be they single words, grammatical constructions, speech codes, or others’ voices. Competence, then, assumes language diversity. Committed to such views of language and language competence, teachers might find ways to celebrate local literacies without privileging standard forms or “restrict[ing] students to their own vernacular” (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 151).

References

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