The Language of Wider Communication: Beyond Ebonics

Within the African American community there is dissension regarding the use of Ebonics. Even among many young African Americans there are differences as evidenced in the oratory of Ashante Kirby, the winner of the NAACP-sponsored ACT-SO (Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological, and Scientific Olympics) oratorical competition for Pennsylvania. Kirby was Pennsylvania's state representative for the National ACT-SO competition held in conjunction with the NAACP National Convention in Pittsburgh in July 1997.

The following is most of Ashante Nicole Kirby's oration as it was delivered during the eliminations at the Convention.

Ashante Nicole Kirby, a 1997 graduate of McKeesport High School, Pennsylvania, presently is enrolled as a freshman at Penn State where she is majoring in English.—OBD

Response to the Issue of Ebonics

Ashante Nicole Kirby
Student, Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

"Fa hoop scas ago an way back when our pops came up wit a new hood. Bread in the statue of liberty. Oh, an Matin's dream that we all be equal."

One may recognize this excerpt as a portion of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and it is the Gettysburg Address, E-Style. America, the cancer of Afrocentricity has reached its newest low. Its latest malignancy has taken shape in Oakland, California. The school system there had voted affirmative to the institutionalization of gutter language and slang.

Gutter language and slang are both terms that refer to America's newest form of communication, Ebonics. Ebonics as a word is derived from two main roots, Ebony or black and Phonics, the representation of sounds with symbols. In other words, Ebonics is a more “politically correct way of saying ignorant.”

This new language has absolutely riveted American society. Many blacks watch the culture they fought to bring out of the gutter lapse back in. Some others simply refer to Ebonics as yet another way of keeping the black community down. So where do we stand on the very controversial issue of Ebonics? We may form our own opinion of Ebonics by questioning whether or not we'll be cheating our children if we adopt Ebonics, also by questioning whether or not Ebonics, just as English, can ever become a universal language.

Will we be cheating our children if we adopt Ebonics? Oakland native and columnist Alicia Banks doesn't think so. She believes that blacks should be awarded linguistic medals of honor for being able to interpret some form of the English language after being torn out of the natural languages and habitats of Africa. She also believes that our cultural differences cripple us from truly learning, understanding, and speaking standard English. If these claims were true, neither any of my peers nor I would be able to speak, comprehend, or write the English language, with all of its beauty, properly. Our cultural differences are very real, but students should not be academically abused because of them.

Can Ebonics, just as English, become a universal language? Seventy-five percent of all foreign countries learn to speak, read, and interpret English as a second language. In a country as diverse as ours one universal truth is well known. Foreign citizens quickly relinquish their foreign tongues at U.S. borders. They do this with hopes of one day succeeding in America. Will college professors understand a student who speaks Ebonics? What about potential employers? Does God understand Ebonics? I hope so. Religion is one of the most important facets of African-American culture. Consider the new interpretation of The Lord's Prayer in Ebonics, presented on the WWW by an anonymous Bible group.

I certainly have difficulty understanding the new interpretation of one of our most sacred prayers.

“Education is the passport to the future. For tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare today.” This quote by slain civil rights leader Malcolm X epitomizes what black education in America should be. We can not afford to let ignorance overcome our culture. We should realize that by adopting Ebonics we will be cheating our children. We should also realize that there is no hope of Ebonics ever becoming a universal language.

I believe that our children are our future. There is only one way for them to succeed. We must love our children, teach them well, and let them lead the way.

How can teachers respond to this perception? What connections can teachers make to the language concerns articulated by Ashante? What approaches could be taken in
the classroom to address the issues raised by Ashante? Whether the usage is labeled Black English Vernacular, or Black dialect, the community is not in agreement on its usage nor its acceptability. Ashante's passionate message should not fall on deaf ears. Finding a medium by which the needs of children who reject standard usage are met and by which the responsibilities of teachers to prepare all children for success in the twenty-first century are achieved is a challenge.

In the following, Gail Sorace, a former high school English teacher, argues for “Building Bridges to the Language of Wider Communication.” Her experiences as a non-Rainbow teacher of Rainbow students and a scholar have led her to study and reflect on ways of using the language children bring to the classroom as a means of building bridges to wider communication.—OBD

Building Bridges to the “Language of Wider Communication”

Gail Beem Sorace
Horner Middle School
Wilkensburg, Pennsylvania

Oral communication continues to be our most prevalent form of communication (Holdzkom, Reed, Porter, and Rubin 1982). The reality is that communication and its accompanying perceptions are affected by communication styles. Communication skills affect our ability to function effectively whether it is in our own community, on the job, or in society in general. The power to operate effectively within American society comes not from simply having the words, but from having a command of the language and the knowledge of which language strategies are appropriate to a given situation and a particular audience.

According to the Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), a joint project of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, becoming more fluent includes gaining mastery over those language forms most commonly recognized as standard English because “all students need to have standard English in their repertoires of language forms, and to know when they should use it” (34). Students must become cognizant of how “language conventions vary from one context to another. They need to make use of a range of language conventions as they create texts for different audiences and purposes” (33). The ability to communicate is thus enhanced by the development and maintenance of multiple language competencies; realizing that in certain contexts, employment of the standard dialect—or what linguist Geneva Smitherman has called the “language of wider communication”—is more useful.

Language instruction is often tantamount to a direct assault on children's language. Because language is intertwined with culture and one's psychic being (Smitherman 1977), language instruction often becomes an assault on the child and the culture to which he belongs. A significant aspect, then, of teaching children from outside the mainstream is a teacher's and school's attitude and behavior toward a child's oral language and culture (Burns 1980; Dean 1989; Gilyard 1991).

According to several researchers, the real problem in teaching children from outside the mainstream is one of differing cultural systems as expressed through contrasting language norms. The language skills non-mainstream children bring with them to the classroom do not correlate to the language skills required for success in school (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968; Abrahams and Gay 1972; Heath 1983). Therefore, teachers must find humane, non-damaging ways to enable children from outside the mainstream to develop the language skills and strategies appropriate to a wide range of situations so as to have a choice—students must be consciously able to choose language appropriate to their purpose and audience when speaking.

LANGUAGE AS INTIMATE, PERSONAL

Language is a “reflection of the society which uses it” (Abrahams and Troike 1972, 141). There is no inherent relation between language and culture. Neither language nor culture determines the form the other will assume. They are, however, tightly interwoven (Langacker 1972). Therefore, Black English cannot be separated from Black Culture or the Black Experience (Smitherman 1973a). Sociolinguistic conflict arises when different speech communities interact and is often the source of problems in the cross-cultural communication that takes place within the classroom, particularly between mainstream teachers and non-mainstream students (Abrahams and Troike 1972). Differing cultural value systems as expressed through differing language norms are the primary problem, however, not dialectal differences (Labov et al. 1968; Abrahams and Gay, 1972; Heath 1983). The fact that the two groups operate within different systems is often ignored or overlooked by educators and by those who direct educational policies (Abrahams and Gay 1972).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of teaching non-mainstream children is a teacher's attitude and behavior toward a child's oral language and culture (Burns 1980; Dean 1989; Gilyard 1991). Not just a means of communication, “language is interwoven with culture and psychic being” (Smitherman 1977, 175). Keith Gilyard (1991) notes that according to P. Trudgill, language is a symbol of identity and group membership. Suggesting that a child's language or that of the group with which he identifies is inferior implies that the child himself is inferior. The child then is likely to be alienated from the school and school culture; or, if he aligns himself with the school, he risks the rejection of the group with which he
identifies. Faced with rejection, the child becomes unenthusiastic about school and produces very little. For many non-standard dialectal speakers, their educational experience then begins in failure and ends in failure (Abrahams and Gay 1972).

Realizing that language is intimate and personal, a teacher must accept and respect its individuality and build upon the language base the child brings with him or her (Labov 1972; Burns 1980). “A pedagogy is successful only if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity” (Gilyard 1991, 11). Teachers need to become more conscious of the nature of language and dialects. They must have “an understanding of the differences in language and culture their students bring to their classrooms” (Heath 1983, 265). Teachers must also provide the means for children to become more cognizant of their own sociolinguistic patterns while moving students to become more fluent language users (Holdzkom et al. 1982). Teaching the “language of wider communication” should be an integral part of a language program which recognizes, accepts, and uses the home dialect or language.

The home language or dialect can then serve as a foundation upon which to build and expand a child’s linguistic repertoire. Since learning takes place when connections are made between new concepts and personal schema, the vernacular can be used as a base on which to build. By providing instruction “that is socially mediated within the zone of proximal development” (Dixon-Krauss 1996, 145), a student’s language ability can be expanded from the vernacular to include the “language of wider communication” (Dixon-Krauss 1996). Allowing children’s home language to serve legitimate functions within the classroom, allowing their home experiences or street experiences into the classroom “could be a starting point for crucial and truly enriching discussions” of relationships among language, knowledge, culture, identity, politics—in brief, many of the connections Black children often ponder” (Gilyard 1991, 115).

**THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL LANGUAGE**

When considering instruction, we must acknowledge how children acquire language initially. Language and its uses are learned simultaneously and incidentally, not being the primary aim, but rather the by-product of some other goal. Speaking and listening function as the foundations upon which the other skills are formed (Loban 1976; Holdzkom et al. 1982; Britton 1993). This interrelationship of language skills was positively demonstrated by Walter Loban’s 1963 study which concludes that children who are more proficient in oral language are also more proficient in reading and writing (Loban 1976). Noting this connection, researchers propose a program rich in oral language activities to nurture and develop oral language knowledge and skills (Holdzkom et al. 1982; Sticht and James 1984).

There is limited value in using classroom practices in which students as passive imitators are drilled in adult structural models. To develop the skills necessary for producing flexible and effective oral communication, students must be systematically and deliberately engaged in oral activities “which promote rich repertoires of communication contexts, provide opportunities for trying out communication behaviors, and supply feedback with which students may evaluate their communicative effectiveness” (Holdzkom et al. 1982, 14). “Pupils must apply whatever is studied to situations in which they have something to say, a deep desire to say it, and someone to whom they genuinely want to say it” (Loban 1976, 90).

Because language competency requires the ability to operate effectively in many different contexts, students must be given the opportunity to explore using language in different situations. The required language is likely to be more important to the students and thus learned more quickly if it is acquired through informal school activities of importance to the child (Holdzkom et al. 1982). Teachers must read stories, poetry, and other texts out loud, helping students to put language into context. In this way students can begin to discern the differences between the standard dialect and their own (Holdzkom et al. 1982; Britton 1993). By establishing a classroom rich in oral language—small group discussions, playing recordings, storytelling, brainstorming, general discussion, word games and word play, mini-debates, choral reading and creative dramatics—teachers can provide students with many rich, varied opportunities for using oral language in many contexts (Burns 1980; Holdzkom et al. 1982).

As places where talk, playful talk, exploratory talk, imaginative talk, is encouraged, where different language styles and skills are modeled as part of purposeful classroom activities and interactions, classrooms rich in oral language will foster and sustain language development (Holdzkom et al. 1982). “Language must continue to grow roots in first-hand experience” (Britton 1993, 137). New speech patterns will be adopted by children as they gain experience with them, but then only as they are inclined to and given the opportunity to use the new patterns (Britton 1993). If we consider language acquisition a creative process (Chomsky 1968; Holdzkom et al. 1982; Fromkin and Rodman, 1993), then we as teachers must also realize that errors in the manipulation of language reflect a particular stage in competency through which a child passes while developing more complex language forms. Teachers’ responses to children’s talk
then must not be evaluative (Holdzkom et al. 1982).

**IMPROVING COMMUNICATION**

To enable a child to improve his communicative effectiveness, a child must develop an understanding of purpose, situational appropriateness, and an awareness of audience (Holdzkom et al. 1982). But that child must first recognize that a problem exists; he or she must perceive a need, otherwise nothing will be accomplished. A nonstandard English-speaking child must be cognizant that a nonstandard dialect will not be acceptable under all circumstances (Allen 1972). The child must recognize the differences between the home dialect and the one being taught and must then be given the opportunity to use the new sound or language pattern often (Burns 1980).

The child must also become aware of style and context. Helping a child to become cognizant of the fact that he or she instinctively uses different styles of language in different environments and contexts will enable conscious choice of language appropriate to a particular purpose and audience. Discussions centered on the different kinds of talk used in different situations and then engagement in activities centered on those concepts will assist the child in a growing awareness of language (Holdzkom et al. 1982). Loban suggests that “the study of language itself should be a central feature in all [language arts] programs. Schools already including such an emphasis have discovered that not only are students fascinated by it, they are also stimulated ‘furiously to think’” (1976, 87).

Cultural dissonance can cause resistance, withdrawal, or open hostility (McGinnis and Smitherman 1978). Gilyard (1991) writes that “cultural conflict finished off many students sooner, caused them to shrink away from formal education before they could fully develop the sociolinguistic ability necessary to educate themselves” (165). According to Terry Dean (1989), acculturation can cause “alienation from the values and relationships of the home culture” (26).

**THE REALITIES OF THE MAINSTREAM**

Educational goals cannot be separated from the realities of mainstream American society (Smitherman 1973a). The question at hand is how to enable non-mainstream students to function purposefully and effectively in the mainstream while maintaining the home culture. Cognizance of culture and sociolinguistic patterns will enable teachers to design social environments which are culturally congruent to their students and learning strategies which blend with cultural comfort zones and learning styles (Dixon-Krauss 1996). Teachers can assist their students in developing sensitivity towards different audiences and dialects by involving their classes in a study of language, dialect, and culture (Holdzkom et al. 1982).

Parents of children from outside mainstream culture “want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (Delpit 1993, 125). According to Lisa Delpit, students then must be allowed direct access to the expert knowledge of the teacher. Skills, that “useful and usable knowledge which contributes to a student’s ability to communicate effectively in standard, generally acceptable literary forms” (Delpit 1986, 384), and language strategies must be made explicit for non-mainstream children (Labov 1972; Delpit 1986; Delpit 1993). Deficits must be attended to.

Children should not be passed through; they must be taught the skills they will need (Delpit 1993). Smitherman (1973b) urges teachers not to allow Black English speaking students to “get away with sloppy, irresponsible” (776) speaking or writing, but also urges teachers to analyze the actual content and meaning of a piece rather than to “correct the Black” (Smitherman 1972, 59) of the piece.

**CONCLUSION**

American society is becoming more culturally diverse. Whether nonstandard English-speaking children are disabled or empowered by their encounters with the schools and the educators within them may depend to a large extent upon the extent to which the home language and culture are allowed into the school setting and upon the extent to which the pedagogy promotes the active language involvement of the students. By using humane, non-damaging pedagogy to enable children from outside the mainstream to develop a wide repertoire of language skills and strategies, we will ensure that children will be consciously able to choose language appropriate to their purposes and audiences.

**Works Cited**


