

The Politics of Correction: How We Can Nurture Students in Their Writing and Help Them Learn the Language of Power

“How can I help kids gain fluency in Standard English—the language of power—without obliterating the home language which is a source of pride and personal voice.” That’s one of those questions that keep conscientious teachers of English awake at night. Through a combination of “scientific” assessment, structured minilessons, and respect for the power and logic of home language, the author has worked out some practical answers.

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Although I am now the high school language arts coordinator for Portland Public Schools and should know how to talk right, I still have to watch my words because when I get emotional, home slips out. I say “chimbly” instead of chimney, “warsh,” and “crik” when I least expect it. I frequently substitute words because I can’t get my tongue around the correct pronunciation.

My brother and sisters chuckle when our mother talks. Her mouth, grown and raised in Bandon, Oregon, has a hard time acquainting itself with foreign words that have become part of our daily language—burrito or futon. As her children, we struggle too, but our language—which has caused us shame in the outside world—bonds us when we’re together, deliberately mispronouncing words and conjugating verbs the way Mom does.

These days, I’m frequently called into schools to “fix” students’ grammar and punctuation errors. I admit to feeling churlish about using conventions—punctuation, grammar, spelling—as the

entry point to student writing. I believe writing must begin in students’ lives and be generated for real audiences. However, in recent years I’ve witnessed too many low-income students, students of color, and immigrant students who have not learned how to use Standard English—the language of power. Sure they can write great slam poetry; some can even write killer stories; a few can write essays, but they are often riddled with convention errors. Failing to learn these skills handcuffs students. Their lack of fluency with the language of power will follow them like the stench of poverty long after students leave school—silencing them by making them hesitant to speak in public meetings or to write their outrage over public policy because they “talk wrong.”

So how do we both nurture students in their writing and help them learn the language of power? We start by telling them what they’re doing right. Too many students are scarred by teachers’ pens in the margins yelling, “You’re wrong. Wrong again. Ten points off for that comma

splice. Where is the past tense?” Language arts teachers become accustomed to looking for errors as if we will be rewarded in some English teacher heaven for finding the most. I know this from experience. I still remember the day when in a frenzy of doing my job right, I corrected every error on Lamar’s budding paper and witnessed his transformation from eager to dejected student. I had to turn that practice around and look for what the students do right.

Lajuane, for example, was a tongue-tied writer when he entered my class in the ninth grade. At the beginning of the year, he gave me very little writing—expecting to be hammered, I suspect. In September, he wrote “My Freshmen Football”:

I Realy Injoy the sport. I like Hiting and running. We had a great team and a great year. I would like to encourage all to play the Sporth.

In this writing, it is clear that he’s afraid to write. Instead of marking his errors, I asked questions and made comments in

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the margin of his paper. “Show me what you like about football. How do you feel when you’re on the field? Tell me about a moment in the game. Make me see the movie.” I brought in models written by other writers, especially student writers. In a revision, he wrote:

When the halmut toches my Head my body turns Like doctor Jeckel and Mr. Hide. I become a safage. And there’s no one who can stop me when this happens. My blood starts racing my hart pumping. Like a great machine of power. And when that football moves that’s the time for me to move and get that quarterback. And anyone who get’s in my way is asking for problems.

His paper went on for two error-filled pages. But in this passage he wrote with passion about a topic he cared about. This comes when a student is freed from the teacher as marksman waiting to “correct” every word. In my response to his paper, I pointed out what he was doing right. For example, I love how he uses similes and metaphors throughout the paper. He also uses strong verbs: *touches*, *racing*, *turns*, *pumping*.

Teacher as Scientist

Obviously when a student’s paper is filled with errors, giving only positive feedback is a dereliction of duty. Students need to know how to access the language of power. Clearly, LaJuane struggled with conventions. But he had so many errors that as a teacher, I had to choose which ones to first target for change. In her book *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy wrote, “[T]he teacher must try to decipher the individual student’s code, examining samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations,

Student Name: LaJuane

Date: September 10

Punctuation: Check capitals

- Do you need the capital?
For example, “I Realy Injoy the sport. I like Hiting and running.”
You don’t need the capitals on really, enjoy or hitting. Ask yourself the question: Is this the beginning of a sentence? Is this a name?
- Capitalize names of streets—Kerby Street, Killingsworth Street

Figure 1.

listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage all students to talk openly about what they don’t understand.”

Using Shaughnessy’s scientist analogy as a model, at the beginning of each year I sit with my students’ papers and categorize each student’s errors, looking for patterns. I keep this list for myself, so I can work with students to eliminate their errors one at a time. I also create a personalized page for each student on my computer. [See figure 1 and figure 2.] As I work with students on their errors, I hold them accountable to self-correct before turning in a final draft. LaJuane’s paper, for example, demonstrates problems with capitalization, apostrophes, spelling, and basic sentence structure. I tackled capitalization first because it was the easiest problem to solve. Then I made him accountable for checking to make sure that he used capitals correctly. By just correcting the capitalization problems, LaJuane eliminated many errors. Once he mastered that convention, we moved on to another.

When I first explain this process, it sounds so time consuming that teachers nod and turn away. Believe me, I am not a

martyr. At Jefferson [High School in Portland], I taught three 90-minute block classes, typically around 90 students, but I would continue to keep track this way even if my student load was 150. Because each student’s error chart is on my computer, I can just update it regularly and print it out when I hand back papers. It actually takes less time than marking—and remarking—the same errors on paper after paper. It is also more effective. When I mark student errors, instead of making them responsible, I’m doing all of the work. If students read their error sheets and make the changes, they do the work. Also, they have to review their error sheet prior to turning in final drafts, so I see fewer errors as the year moves on.

Teaching Minilessons

Frequently, many students in my classes make the same errors—punctuating dialogue, for example—and I can teach minilessons. In fact, when possible, I find the best way to deal with these problems is to ask students to generate the rules. They remember their rules far longer than when they read the rule and correct the errors in a punctuation exercise.

When I’m teaching students the rules around dialogue, I copy a page from a short story or novel that demonstrates many of the rules—a piece of dialogue interrupted by an attribution, a question, a dialogue where the speakers change but there is no attribution. Then I put the students in small groups and ask them to write up five rules for punctuating dialogue and to include an example for each rule. After checking to see if the rules are correct, we post the rules on the wall as a reminder during writing time. Students also learn that if they forget the rules, they can just pull down a novel that has dialogue and figure them out again.

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Logical Errors from Home Language

Sometimes the “errors” are part of a student’s home language. In that case, the “correction” process needs to make it clear that the student isn’t “wrong,” but that each language has its own way of making plurals or using verb tenses. Students need to explicitly learn the differences between their home language and Standard English.

In my classes, I attempt to honor language variations by studying—and honoring—their use in literature first. After reading authors who employ home language and Standard English—Lucille Clifton, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Lois Yamanaka—the class discusses which genres and situations call for them to code switch between their home language and Standard English. Students are quick to point out that when writing poetry or dialogue in narratives—genres that call for informal language—they may choose to use their home language. But when they are writing essays, college or job applications, state writing tests—genres that call for formal language—they may choose Standard English.

As a teacher in a predominantly African American school where the majority of students exhibited some features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, also called Ebonics or “Spoken Soul”), I needed to learn the rules and history of the language so I could help students move between the two language systems.

In my student Larry’s narrative about shoes, for example, I needed to keep track of his patterns of punctuation errors, but I also had to help him understand when he used features of AAVE:

*Them old Chuck Taylor high top
nasty looking Converse these are the*

Student Name: Larry

Date: December 10

Grammar: African American
Vernacular English

- AAVE uses subject and a pronoun, SE uses one or the other.

You wrote: *My mother she* went to the store.

In SE: *My mother* went to the store.

- AAVE drops the “s” on the verb when you use he or she:

You wrote: *My mom say* they was in style.

In SE: *My mom says* they [are/were] in style.

- AAVE drops *is* or *are* between a subject (in this case, “they”) and a predicate (what’s said *about* the subject — in this case that the shoes are raggedy). SE inserts the *is* or *are*.

You wrote: I don’t see how *they raggedy*.

In SE: I don’t see how. They *are raggedy*.

*Note: Due to space limitations, this example does not show: Punctuation, spelling, syntax, genre patterns.

Figure 2.

*ugliest shoes I had ever seen. I
thought as I put them on.*

*“Mom why I have to wear these ugly
shoes.” My mom say they was in style.*

*“Larry be quiet these are in style
right now.”*

“I don’t see how they raggedy.”

While Larry made some basic errors in punctuation, many of his “mistakes” correctly use the grammar structure of AAVE. This can be difficult for a teacher without a linguistic background to understand. As Geneva Smitherman noted in her groundbreaking book *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, “Linguistically speaking, the greatest differences between contemporary Black and White English are on the level of grammatical structure.” It looks

like Larry’s errors are simply grammatical, but if a teacher studied the grammar of Ebonics/AAVE, she would recognize that he follows many of the linguistic features of black vernacular.

For Larry, simply correcting these grammar errors without acknowledging their roots in his home language is not only inefficient, it sets Standard English up as the “correct language” and AAVE as wrong. Larry needed to understand how he was transferring the “logic” of his home language into the sentence structure of Standard English, and he needed to know how and when to change that.

For example, in the sentence “My mom say they was in style,” the lack of the third-person singular present tense *s* (*say* instead of *says*) follows the grammar patterns of AAVE. I like the explanation John and Russell Rickford give of this rule in *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, “In getting rid of third-person *s*, you might think of AAVE as making the rules of English more regular, or as an advocate for equal opportunity: the verb doesn’t have special endings with other subjects, so it shouldn’t with third-person singular subjects.”

The lack of a *be* verb in the run-on sentence, “I don’t see how they raggedy” is another example of Larry following the rules of AAVE. In mainstream English, the sentence would read: “I don’t see how. They are raggedy.” This is called zero copula—or the absence of an *is* or *are*—which are called copulas because they couple, or join, a subject (in this case, “they”) and a predicate (what’s said *about* the subject—in this case that the shoes are raggedy). In order for Larry to code-switch, he had to be aware that he was using AAVE, which has a complex set of rules and restrictions—especially around the verb *be*. According to the Rickfords, “As with most

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rules of spoken language, no AAVE speaker has ever been taught these things formally, and few speakers could spell them out for you (unless, perhaps, they had learned them in a linguistics course). But AAVE speakers follow them, almost religiously, in their daily speech.” And, I would add, many students translate their spoken home language into their writing.

In my experience, teaching African American students the grammar structure and history of Spoken Soul or AAVE, evoked pride in their language, but also that electric “aha” moment of discovery. All students—not just African Americans—benefited from learning that African American language is a highly structured grammar system, not “lazy English,” as linguist John Rickford points out in his powerful article “Suite for Ebony and Phonics.”

As one of my African American students said after studying the grammar of AAVE:

I grew up thinking Ebonics was wrong. My teachers would say, “If you ever want to get anywhere you have to learn how to talk right”... At home, after school, break time, lunch time, we all talked our native language which was Ebonics. Our teachers were wrong for saying our language wasn’t right. Their language wasn’t right in our eyes. All I heard was Spanish and Ebonics in my neighborhood. Until they brainwashed me at school to be ashamed of my language. And that almost took away one of the few things that African Americans had of our past life and history.

Teacher Study Groups

In my current role as high school language arts specialist, I encourage teachers to

form study groups to analyze the patterns of errors their students bring to class. During the summer of 2002, a small group of language arts and ESL teachers looked at the errors their Russian, Vietnamese, and Spanish-speaking students made in writing. Once they identified the patterns, they discussed/studied the original languages of their students. In a draft guide for language arts and ESL teachers, they noted the “logical errors” students made. In their introduction, the group reminded teachers that “English language learning students: 1) experience linguistic interference from their first language sound system; 2) apply first language rules to Standard English; 3) speak fluently before they learn to write fluently; and 4) over apply newly learned grammatical rules.” They also listed common errors and related them back to the rules governing the first language. For example, in Vietnamese, the adverb expresses time; the verb remains unchanged; therefore a student whose first language is Vietnamese might write: “Yesterday, I go to the mall.”

Teachers at a predominantly African American middle school formed a study group to analyze their students’ errors and study AAVE. The majority of the teachers in the group are African American. During a discussion one morning, a teacher pointed out, “I always told my students what my teachers told me, ‘Read your writing out loud and correct those places where it doesn’t sound right.’ One of my students said, ‘But it does sound right.’” The teachers discussed this point for a while. “It sounds right because it sounds like the way we talk at home. It can sound odd when we use Standard English.” The study group helped us clarify that our old piece of advice might work with Standard English speakers, but not

with students whose home language is not the same as school language.

Once students begin—error by error—to understand how to “clean up” their writing, they gain confidence in their ability. They no longer feel like targets in the cross-hairs of the teacher’s red pen; they don’t need to “wash history from their throats” as Patricia Smith so passionately writes in [her article] “Talking Wrong.” Teachers exercise enormous power when we take our pens to student papers. Will we use our power to help students understand that Standard English is one dialect among many, or will we use it to whittle away students’ voice and home language one error at a time?

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