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# “A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation”: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching

Brian White

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In eleven years of working with future English teachers at a mid-sized, Midwestern university, I have had only a handful of students who were not White. This academic year, I have taught the equivalent of six courses for future teachers and have had three students of color (two in one course), more than in any previous year. Although our university and the public schools in our region are increasingly diverse, our teacher education program, like most programs across the country, remains largely homogenous (Sleeter; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts). As McFalls & Cobb-Roberts note,

Understanding diversity issues has become a fundamental component of teacher education programs in colleges and universities across the United States. By the year 2025, it is predicted that the proportion of students of color will increase to approximately 50% of the student population, and the majority of teachers will continue to be White, middle-class women (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Singh, 1996). To ensure academic success for all students, teachers need to understand, appreciate, and respect the differences their students bring to the classroom. (164)

Of course, language differences are among those most worthy of understanding, appreciation, and respect. Most of my students come to the university from nearly all-White high schools; many have had very little contact with people of

color. They know that many of their future students will be speakers of “non-standard dialects,” and they often express concern about their own ability to respond appropriately and helpfully. They wonder if they will be able to understand their students, if they will know how to respond to dialect-laden speech and writing, and if their students will be willing to change, to write and speak more “mainstream” English.

We try to prepare future teachers to work with diverse populations in part by providing (and requiring) extensive field experiences in multicultural schools. We also require coursework focusing on cultural and linguistic diversity, introducing them to the varieties of English and alerting them to the entrenchment of racism in society and in the academy. Some of their training includes direct instruction in recognizing and overcoming racist tendencies, as Tatum and others (e.g., McFalls & Cobb-Roberts) advocate. Our university’s general education program requires them to take courses in the cultural diversity of the United States; our teacher education program includes a required course entitled “Diversity in Education”; and our English major program requires courses in applied- and socio-linguistics in which matters of linguistic diversity figure prominently. By the time they are seniors, the majority of our future English teachers have learned both that they are speakers of a standard dialect and that non-standard dialects are neither inherently wrong nor inferior. Indeed, by the end of their required course work, many have already determined to celebrate linguistic diversity in their future classrooms.

Surely this is a sign that our efforts to promote and enhance diversity are succeeding. When students who arrived at the university relatively unaware and perhaps even somewhat afraid of linguistic diversity graduate with richer understanding of and greater openness to dialectal and cultural differences, we might assume that we are achieving some of our most important goals as educators. But greater awareness and openness are not enough. For example, one result of these attitudinal changes is that many of our students conclude, at least tentatively, that when they become teachers they will encourage their linguistically diverse students to continue to value and to use their non-standard dialects outside of the classroom (unless they are applying for a job), while requiring everyone to learn and to use Standard English inside of the classroom (at least most of the time).

Honoring the use of both home codes and power codes (Delpit, Fecho) in various situations seems to solve an important problem: How can we show students that we respect the beauty and power of their native dialects and at the same time teach them to use Standard English as the language of education and commerce? As Fecho and others (e.g., Pari; Fox) have demonstrated, however, codeswitching is no easy answer to that thorny problem. For example, Fecho describes culturally and linguistically diverse high school students who found themselves “caught in a linguistic catch-22: They could opt for the home codes and appear natural (a sought-after attribute in this community of speakers) or they could opt for standard codes and be considered proper (a necessity for negotiating the main-stream culture)” (381). Fecho argues that these students didn’t have much chance of being perceived as both natural and proper simultaneously and that codeswitching endangered their relationships and their status in their home communities. One of Fecho’s students “spoke to the manner in which imposed codeswitching causes discomfort at the least and alienation in the extreme” (381). Similarly, Pari writes of the discomfort and alienation she

experienced as a non-standard dialect speaker in the academy, of the assault she felt upon her White, Italian-American, working class culture and language, and of her growing determination to resist the imposition of required codeswitching by a dominant culture.

So, although many of our mainstream-English-speaking future teachers seem to believe that imposed codeswitching is the way to help students be comfortable and successful in every situation, Fecho and Pari help us to see some of the reasons why many students resist and resent imposed codeswitching, even when they are told that codeswitching ability will help them to “get ahead.” The future teachers in my classes, the vast majority of whom have never been asked (let alone required) to switch codes, often emphasize what their future students are likely to gain by becoming fluent in both the home codes and the power codes; but Fecho and Pari illustrate the deeply penetrating losses experienced by some students who are required to switch codes in order to meet what often appears to them to be an arbitrary standard.

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**My guess is that my students’ faith in codeswitching stems in part from their exposure to cultural myths.**

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My guess is that my students’ faith in codeswitching stems in part from their exposure to cultural myths. For example, they seem to believe that the ability to codeswitch will automatically open the doors of commerce and the academy to people of color. By contrast, one of Fecho’s (2000) African-American students plainly declares that, even if a non-mainstream speaker were to acquire the standard dialect, “there’s no way he’d fit in” in the dominant culture (381). But my students’ opinions might also simply arise from lack of experience: they’ve never had to codeswitch to try get along or to try to get ahead. They’ve never FELT what it’s like to be forced to codeswitch. Their language has always been standard and acceptable. For them, the home codes are the power codes.

### **What's a Teacher Educator to Do?**

Recently, while teaching a required course in critical theory for senior English majors, the vast majority of whom are future teachers, I found myself wondering how I could help my students experience at least some of the alienation that speakers of non-standard dialects might feel when they attempt to integrate into the academy, when they are told rather forcefully that their home codes are insufficient and incorrect. My purpose was not to teach them that codeswitching was “wrong” or necessarily harmful, but I wanted them to understand that teaching and enforcing codeswitching can be difficult and risky, that it can be a too-facile answer to the question, “So, how are you going to respond to nonstandard dialects in your classroom?” In order to give my students some first-hand experience at the problem of codeswitching, I devised the following instructional sequence.

#### **First Impressions: Responding to an Opinionnaire**

As a way of beginning our conversation about linguistic diversity and teachers' responses to non-standard dialects, I gave my students the following opinionnaire (see Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern or White and Johnson for an explanation of opinionnaire exercises). I asked my students to respond individually to each item on the opinionnaire (see Figure 1) by circling either “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” Then I put the students in groups to share and discuss their answers. Their job in the groups was to identify the items about which their group most disagreed and to try to achieve consensus on those items.

After the small-group discussions, we had a brief large-group report and discussion of the most contentious items. Of course, some of the items were not contentious. For example, most of the students agreed that their native dialect is the standard (item #1), and nearly all agreed that speakers of non-standard dialects must be taught the standard (item #5). The groups tended to

disagree about items like #8: although they generally agreed that everyone must learn the standard, some felt that an imposed standard was essentially and inescapably racist, while others argued that an imposed standard could be a powerful anti-racist tool.

For homework, I asked the students to identify the opinionnaire item they felt most strongly about and to write their responses to that item in their journals. Many of the students chose to write about the importance of codeswitching and the absolute necessity of teaching the standard dialect. The following responses are representative:

1. *People have a right to speak their own language or dialect because it is part of who they are. Language is an important part of a group's culture. However, I do think that in order for there to be good communication among all Americans, there needs to be a common language that all citizens are at least comfortable using. In business and politics, for example, people need to be able to understand each other. . . . That does not mean that their language or dialect should be banned. They should certainly have the opportunity to use it in addition to the standard English.*

~Diane

2. *I think that everyone in the U.S. should learn to speak and write Standard English. They will be at a much better advantage if they do. However, I do believe children should keep their native languages as well. . . . This may be a very prejudiced remark but I believe if you come to the U.S. to live you should learn our language.*

~Peg

3. *Language is a form of identity and forcing a person to learn and use a non-native language may confuse their cultural identity or place their native culture secondary to that which speaks Standard English. . . . Then we come to the question of necessity. I struggle with this because I tend to believe that the only*

*way to communicate on a national level, in commerce and education, is with one universal language; but I know that this isn't politically correct. I do also value the various cultures that make up America and would never wish for them to be suppressed.*

~Eric

4. *I strongly disagree with the belief that forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English is a form of racism. How is this racism? Is it racism when you go to China and everything is in Chinese and you are expected to know Chinese in order to live there? Of course not! No one even thinks of the concept of racism when this occurs in China, France, Japan or Germany—why would they when it occurs in the U.S.? Every country needs a common language to unite its people, in business, in education, in religion, and in family.*

~Barb

5. *By forcing non-native English speakers to learn English, educators are giving them the best possible chance to succeed. . . . It would not do any good to allow other languages or variances to grow.*

~Jeff

6. *I have been around BEV and to me it is like a second language. I think it would make things much easier. . . . to all have one Standard dialect of English in common. . . . Don't lose your existing dialect, but as a nation, let's have one standard dialect of English in common for all purpose use.*

~Jana

As you can see, some of the students' essays betrayed some misunderstanding of the terms dialect and language; still, a high percentage argued, often rather passionately, that a teacher's goal should be to teach all students to speak and write Standard English in the classroom while at the same time honoring and valuing the students' home dialects in appropriate (usually nonacademic)

settings. In order to facilitate further discussion of these issues, I asked students to trade journal entries with a classmate and to respond in writing. In the large-group, we then discussed ideas which we found particularly important, compelling, or disagreeable.

Following our discussion, I asked the students to reflect in writing on the opinionnaire exercise, to evaluate the experience, and to explain what they felt they might have learned so far. The students reported that the opinionnaire activity (including the writing and the discussion) was very helpful to them in clarifying their ideas and in broadening their views. For example, one student wrote that "the opinionnaire was particularly challenging because it forces you to get right at the heart of the Standard English controversy"; another wrote that "some of the questions on the opinionnaire were difficult to answer because there were a lot of 'what ifs.' There were many questions that we disagreed on, but when we listened to each other, other people's views made a lot of sense. After talking to my group members, I ended up changing a lot of my answers because they made me see it an entirely different way"; finally, another student wrote that "it became very clear to me, through the questionnaire exercise, that language carries power. I hadn't seen it as having economic power before. The power to communicate in the world of commerce, yes, but not the brute strength of excluding people some may call 'inferior.' "

After completing our discussion of the opinionnaire and our responses, we read Bob Fecho's article "Critical Inquiries into Language in an Urban Classroom." We responded to the article in small- and large-group discussions, sometimes using individual writing to record our perspectives and our developing understandings. Fecho's urban, African- and Caribbean-American students taught us about some of the potential perils of codeswitching; his article also emphasized the importance of getting to know our students, their cultures, and their dialects, and it encouraged us to invite high school students to

inquire systematically into their own languages and dialects.

After we had discussed the opinionnaire and the article, I sensed that my students were more open to thinking about the risks of imposing a standard—but the issue still seemed entirely too theoretical, too distant. I wanted them to read about Pari's experiences, but I was afraid that they would not feel the power of her story. After all, Pari is White and, for the most part, her story is written in Standard English. In addition, Pari writes about her experiences as a working class New Yorker in the doctoral program at the CUNY graduate school: in many ways, her experience was as distant from my students' lives as were the experiences of Fecho's African- and Caribbean-American high school students. I thought that, in response to Pari, my students might fall back to their rather comfortable position: "Pari's story proves that, although it's hard, you need to preserve the home codes for home and learn the power codes for education. After all, Pari has made it. She's a professor now. She's writing in Standard English but she's still proud of her heritage." In short, I was afraid that they would understand Pari's story but that they would not feel anything of what she (or Fecho's students) felt. Often, students who are required to codeswitch feel that hidden and arbitrary rules are being forced upon them without explanation or apology. Like Fecho's students, they feel that their natural speech, ways of communicating which have been both successful and unconscious, are no longer acceptable. That's what I wanted my students to feel.

### **Ways Without Words: The No "E" Exercise**

Delpit helps her students to feel some of the discomfort involved in learning and speaking a new dialect feature by requiring them to insert the sound /iz/ after each initial consonant. She reports that the exercise is effective but that even the students who struggle with speaking the /iz/ dialect have no problem writing it. I think that's because the exercise calls for the addition of a feature instead of the subtraction of a feature. Perhaps the exercise would be more difficult and

more realistic if it were to prohibit the use of a habitually relied upon feature. This is what I decided to do. I began our next class session by saying:

*We've been doing a lot of reading and talking about differences between home culture and school culture, home codes and power codes. We've completed an opinionnaire and we've read and discussed Fecho. So far, though, we've really been talking about other people's experiences. I'd like to try to bring this a little closer to home. Let's begin class today by doing some freewriting about our memories of our first day in school or our first day at the university. What do you remember about the transition? How did you feel about being in school? Did you have any cultural barriers to overcome?*

Before they began to write, I said, "You know that I usually write with you. This time, I prepared my freewrite before class because I'd like you to follow my example. Use my writing as a model if you can." I put my essay on an overhead and projected it onto the wall. Here's my essay in its entirety:

*On my first day in school, I was sort of in trauma. I didn't want to go away from my mom or my room or my dad. I was not in a good mood during our short walk from my front door to a big round room I'd soon know as my school room. Mrs. B was tall and imposing; I was short and found this situation awfully scary. I did want to go back with my Mom. I couldn't stand staying. Boys and girls walking about, boys and girls I didn't know. For many ticks of a clock I was afraid that I was not in my right room. Scary. So scary. At last, my day wasn't too bad. In fact, as I ran back to Mom, I was thinking, "School's not so awful."*

My students read my essay and looked at me quizzically. They knew that the essay seemed kind of stilted, but they didn't ask why I had written it that way. The truth was that I had written the essay without using any words containing the letter "e"—but I didn't tell them that. I simply asked if they had any questions about what they were supposed to do, reminded them that they'd be sharing their essays with each other, and asked them to begin. After about eight minutes, I asked the students to stop writing and to trade papers. Their job was to take their classmate's paper, to read it carefully looking for words that contain the letter "e," to cross those words out (marking them incorrect), and to record the number "wrong" at the top of the page. "You'll notice," I went on, "that my model paragraph contained no e's. I hope you followed my model. Please correct your classmate's paper now." The students diligently complied, some with puzzled glances, some with knowing looks and smiles communicating to me that they understood my game. After the students finished crossing out and counting, I announced that any paper with more than seven wrong should receive a failing grade. (Nobody had fewer than 25 "wrong"; some had as many as 65).

The students returned the papers to their owners. I then explained phase two of the assignment. "Now, I'd like you to fix your essay. Please rewrite it, but remember, no e's." Now there was some nervous laughter in the room, followed by some expressions of exasperation. Brows were furrowed; I could feel the anxiety level rising. Students were writing and crossing out, sometimes erasing forcefully. After about 5 minutes, I interrupted them and asked them how they were doing. Our initial discussion was animated:

"This is way too hard!"

"I never knew how often I used the letter e."

"Is this how it feels to be told that you can't write the way you've always written?"

For homework, I asked them to reflect on the "no e" exercise and to write down their responses. Because I wanted them to evaluate the exercise itself as well as their responses to it, I

asked them to keep their responses anonymous. I wanted them to be able to criticize my use of the exercise without worrying about offending me and without the concerns for "political correctness" some of them mentioned when responding to the opinionnaire. Here are some representative reflections on the "no e exercise":

1. *The exercise with the no letter e paragraph was a terrific means of making the issue real. Some people may have had fun doing it, but the frustration level sky-rocketed and that's not something I could tolerate on a daily basis for real grades. Of course, it's not exactly like what non-Standard English speakers and writers experience, but it was close enough for us to understand it at a more personal level.*

2. *I think it was very effective in communicating how frustratingly difficult it can be to be a non-English speaking or ESL student in an American classroom. I also think that it demonstrated a certain amount of ambiguity that exists in grading work of ESL or learning disabled students. A number of students stated that it made them feel "stupid," despite the fact that they are clearly intelligent students in their last year at the university.*

3. *We were placed in a situation where we had no choice but to write in a way that was unfamiliar and almost foreign to us. It made me take a step back and really think about and recognize that writing in Standard English, even though it is considered "standard," is definitely not standard for everyone.*

4. *When I filled out the opinionnaire, I thought that I knew exactly how I felt. Basically, I had sympathy for ESL students and African Americans who were uncomfortable with Standard English, but essentially it was something they would have to deal with. This is the way our world is, and it's not going to change. And while I still believe that these students need to learn Standard English to be successful, I now believe educators need to be more sensitive to their needs. It was very frustrating and impossible to write well and naturally under YOUR rules.*

5. *I always assumed that speakers of AAVE*

*[African-American Vernacular English] and other dialects had no problems with Standard English. This exercise made me realize how difficult it must be.*

6. *The no e exercise was a real eye opener for me. I got the feeling that was how people felt when they were trying to change their dialect into proper English. Restricting how and what we could write helped us to see what people who are not used to or comfortable with Standard English must feel.*

7. *It was nearly impossible for me to write a coherent thought the second time when we couldn't use words with the letter "e" in them. I was so fixated on not using the letter that I couldn't think clearly, let alone write creatively. How hard it must be for students who are asked to write under those kinds of conditions. The exercise helped me to feel their frustration. The restrictions of Standard English must seem just as ridiculous to them as the restriction of not using the letter E was to us.*

8. *It is easy for me to say that we should have a standard and that everyone should follow it because my language is the standard. The "e" exercise helped me to understand that a standard is easy only to those who already know it—while to those that don't it is a very powerful tool of alienation.*

I was hoping that the exercise would help my students to sense at least some of the discomfort and alienation that imposed codeswitching can engender, so I was pleased with my students' reflections. But of course, not all students responded so positively to the exercise. Two of the 23 students in the class felt that the exercise was too drastic. For example, one student said,

*I thought it effectively demonstrated the point of not being able to say what you want to say in the way you want to say it, but my personal opinion of it is that the exercise was far more extreme than the issue of standardized English and dialects. Having to adjust the way you speak or write to a norm/standard is not the same as being unable to use one of the most used and most essential letters of one's alphabet.*

Another student commented that the exercise was "fun and interesting," but that it "was too removed from what non-standard English speakers/writers feel. I had no idea where you were going with it." I think I understand what these students are trying to say, and they do have a point. My imposed standard removed a high number of words from their available lexicon, forcing them to alter their utterances rather drastically. These students are arguing that when we require speakers of non-standard dialects to use Standard English, we do not remove from them so many words that are so essential to their communication. This is true. Still, the exercise had to be very intense in order to help the students feel some of the negative emotion involved with codeswitching. Furthermore, the letter "e" does not appear more frequently in Standard English than do, say, final consonant clusters in African American Vernacular English. When we add other "non-standard" features of AAVE (the use of proximity to show possession, the acceptability of multiple negation, and so on), we could argue that native speakers of certain non-standard dialects deal with many more rule changes than my students had to deal with for the "no e exercise." In addition, I did not ask my students to speak without "e's." If I had, they might have found, as Delpit's students do, that speaking the new dialect is even more difficult than writing it.

I am aware that the exercise is artificial. I wish I could have drawn upon my students' actual experiences. But the artificiality of the exercise seems not to have prevented most of my students from feeling some of the frustration and anxiety which can attend required codeswitching. The instructional sequence was not intended to change their minds about the importance of Standard English or the desirability of codeswitching. It was intended to help them think more carefully and perhaps differently about how it feels to be forced to learn and use a different form of language than one is used to. Overall, my students' responses and reflections indicate that the sequence was successful.

### **“We Lost That Comfort Zone”**

Teaching future teachers about diversity issues can be difficult. Some speakers of mainstream English find discussions of diversity personally and socially threatening. McFalls & Cobb-Roberts argue that “the challenge that teacher educators face when there is resistance to diversity issues is to create alternative methods for introducing ideas that are threatening to students” (165). They advocate preparing students for “cognitive dissonance” by teaching them, in advance, about the dissonance they are likely to experience during discussions of diversity. I believe that their approach has merit. But I would contend—and I’m sure that McFalls and Cobb-Roberts would agree—that learning about diversity issues and carefully monitoring our responses to those issues won’t be enough. Prior to the “no e exercise,” my students, relatively well schooled (but not well practiced) in diversity, felt that codeswitching was an obvious and relatively problem-free approach to linguistic diversity in the classroom. They felt that it was the perfect way to honor the home codes while still teaching all students the power codes. Having had no experience with the potentially confounding difficulties of codeswitching, they were prepared simply to tell their future students to switch codes whenever the situation required it.

The “no e exercise” did not lead them to deny the importance of codeswitching, but in conjunction with the reading of some powerful first-hand accounts it revealed to them some of the dangers and difficulties of which they had previously been unaware. As one student noted, “We were all very comfortable writing the first paragraph (with e’s). Then, when we had to rewrite that paragraph, we lost that comfort zone. The simple task of writing, of communicating a very familiar story, became extremely difficult.” My hope is that the loss of the comfort zone will encourage future teachers to approach codeswitching much more carefully and more thoughtfully, with greater understanding of the alienation and frustration required codeswitching can engender.

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### **About the Author**

Brian White is an Associate Professor of English at Grand Valley State University.

Figure 1

**An Opinionnaire on "Standard English"**

1. I speak and write Standard English as my native dialect.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
2. Everyone in the United States should speak and write Standard English all the time.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
3. Standard English is the only acceptable language for commerce in the United States.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
4. Standard English is the only acceptable language for education in the United States.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
5. Speakers of non-standard dialects (like African-American Vernacular English and Spanish Influenced English) must be taught the Standard dialect of English so that they can succeed in school and in careers in the United States.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
6. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English instead of their native dialects is unnecessary.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
7. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English instead of their native dialects is potentially harmful.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
8. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English is actually a form of racism, a way of reinforcing the status quo which privileges everything that is white and middle-class.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
9. Non-native speakers of English who intend to stay in the United States should learn to speak and write English as soon as possible upon entering the country.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
10. The public schools should accommodate non-native speakers of English by providing bilingual education while the non-native speakers are learning English.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
11. Since the United States is already one of the largest Spanish-speaking countries in the world, we should be an officially bilingual nation.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
12. English should be THE language of the United States.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree