The Reading Connection

By Jordan Fabish

STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH IN THE READING CLASSROOM

In the 1970s, the award-winning older-kids version of Sesame Street was Electric Company, featuring talents such as Rita Moreno (Heyyy Youuu Guyyyyyyys!!!) and yet-undiscovered Morgan Freeman as “Easy Reader.” The show’s creative and quirky slots included “The Adventures of Spidey,” a live-action rendering of Marvel comic’s “Spider-Man.” My friend who taught inner-city pre-school often chuckled at her favorite little boy’s version of the theme song:

Spider Man . . . where are you comin' from?
Spider Man . . . where are you goin’ to?
Spider Man . . . NObody KNOW who you IS!

That little boy is probably 30 years old now, and I wonder if he is still conjugating his verbs in the same way. It’s not as cute at 30. But perhaps cuteness should never have been the issue. Was not being amused at his deviation from Standard American English a prime example of using language to demean and subjugate minorities? The “Standard American English” issue is inherently complex because, as Vygotsky’s work suggests, language and culture are inseparable: your language is you. To discuss the teaching of Standard American English is to debate not only what features are, indeed, “standard,” but also to consider prescriptive vs. descriptive grammar, linguistic change, whole language vs. phonics, English as a second language, Ebonics, limited proficiency, dialectical differences, situational appropriateness, cultural identity, racism, and classism—all associated with high-running emotions because, again, your language is you. What is your position?

We can probably agree that, “roughly speaking, Standard is the kind of English which is:

1. written in published work,
2. spoken in situations where published writing is most influential, especially in education (and especially at University level),
3. spoken ‘natively’ (at home) by people who are most influenced by published writing—the ‘professional class’” (Hudson, 2000).

Also, research by social linguists has brought to light the structural regularity, logic and even literary merit (as with pidgin) of non-standard dialects, promoting respect for them and their speakers. (Sociolinguist William Labov has a considerable corpus of work on this subject for further research. http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~labov/papers.html.) That said, the most realistic message we can bring to our students may be this one: “The fact is that the world is full of teachers, employers, and other authorities who may penalize you for your non-standard use of the English language. Feel free to denounce these people if you wish; but if you need their good opinion to get ahead, you’d be wise to learn Standard English” (Brians, 2002).

The issue we must decide is if any of this is within the purview of teaching reading. Our students’ ultimate professional success may be inextricably tied to their acquiring Standard American English in academic and professional settings, but is their doing so any more our business than if they regularly eat a nourishing breakfast? Does it really have anything to do with reading? There is research and opinion to indicate that it does, not because of any social or political necessity, but in order to get a good match between what the reader expects to read and what is, in fact, in the text.
Presented compactly and concisely, an article by C. A. Winters in The Negro Educational Review addressed issues at the foundation of reading and comprehension discourse as they apply to and are affected by Standard American English (SAE) and Ebonics or Vernacular Black English (VBE). The principles have implications for second-language learners and for all readers. Winters cited current linguistic research to establish these constructs: fluent reading is a function of Standard American English proficiency, segmenting and matching phonemes to print; reading problems result from deficits in such competence in an otherwise cognitively and neurolinguistically sound student who may “suffer a block at the initial step of the reading process because of the failure to comprehend SAE phonemes” (Winters, 1998, p. 83). Winters identified VBE as neither slang (popular notion) nor a transformation of SAE (Chomsky model), but a dialect that uses West African morphology and syntax with English vocabulary. For example, speakers of Niger-Congo languages and Ebonics drop initial or final consonant clusters (as in then/den and left/lef). Mother-child interaction programs the brain to organize a “perceptual map”; if that neural path is connected to Ebonics, the “orthography, phonetic system and deep grammatical structure” will not match the SAE of print (Winters, p. 85). Negative teacher-response to Ebonics, as well as teaching methods that de-emphasize phonics, are contributing problems, but it is the sound and syntactical mismatch or lack of match which thwarts reading fluency.

If the reading process involves the interaction of orthographic, phonological, context and meaning processors that choose among potential familiar “candidates” in the brain for that meaning (Adams, 1998), it follows that the candidates must be in place. That is the reason Standard American English is relevant to reading—to put the candidates in place, to provide a match of familiar choices.

Reason suggests encouraging VBE speakers to learn SAE as a second language. Regardless of the logic or worth of VBE, those who speak it will find a different language in print, and too many differences overwhelm the reading process. VBE speakers must not be forgotten as we attempt to help all second language learners match language to print. Realistically, non-standard speakers (both “native” and non-native) will not be enrolling in ESL classes, and many who do attend them will leave too soon. As reading teachers, we are in on helping our students to code-switch.

In order to do it well, we need the right approach and the right information. The Center for Applied Linguistics’ first two guidelines for teaching SAE at any level are:

The teaching of Standard English must take into account the importance of the group reference factor. Speakers who want to participate in a particular social group will typically learn the language of that group, whereas those with no group reference or with antagonistic feelings toward the group are less likely to do so. [cf. becoming members of the “literacy club” in all of Frank Smith’s work.]

Instruction in Standard English should be coupled with information about the nature of dialect diversity. By giving students information about various dialects, including their own, teachers can demonstrate the integrity of all dialects. This approach clarifies the relationship between standard and vernacular dialects, underscoring the social values associated with each and the practical reasons for learning the standard dialect.

They go on to suggest a clear understanding of dialect differences as well as the community’s language norms and the conventions of conversational conventions such as expectations of business phone conversations, for example (Christian, 1997).

In planning SAE for the classroom, our education at CSUF would lead us to a literature-based presentation of balanced direct and indirect instruction such as is suggested in the fourth of Botel’s Five Critical Experiences: Investigating Language in Social Contexts (Seaver & Botel, 1986). We can also model our own passionate interest in language and meaning by observing our own SAE. Is our “lie/lay” usage standard? “Affect/effect” all straight? How about objective-case pronouns? Subject-verb number
agreement? I cannot number the times I have heard a teacher say, “There’s three things . . .” instead of, “There are [or there’re] three . . .” There is always something else to learn!

And there are lots of nifty new resources to help us. If you prefer an online source, you probably already visit Bartelby.com (http://www.bartelby.com/) with links to a banquet of books on meaning and usage, including Strunk and White’s Elements of Style, a recommended staple in everyone’s book pantry. Most established textbook publishing houses regularly update their in-depth English handbooks (containing MLA and APA style summaries, too) and have online sites. (cf. The New St. Martin’s Handbook, printed, or see www.bedfordstmartins.com/nsmhandbook.) For something lighter, try Nitty-Gritty Grammar (1998), the friendliest promoter of SAE yet. (Don’t mix it up with Woe Is I. It sounds clever, but O’Connor, the annoyed author, has really just written a personal rant.) Nitty-Gritty’s witty authors, Fine & Josephson, have pared the topics to the most useful and presented them with a smile.

We can help our students read better by equipping them with Standard American English. However, “the teaching of standard English requires careful thought, ranging from underlying educational philosophy to particular teaching strategies, if it is to be carried out effectively and equitably” (Christian, 1997).

Cambridge, MA: Bradford.


Google database on the World Wide Web

Hudson, R. (2000). The Language Teacher and descriptive versus prescriptive norms:
The educational context. Retrieved May 18, 2002 from Google database on

Levittown, PA: Morton Botel Associates.


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Kids Tutoring Kids
Ed. note: The following is a reprint of a letter from one of our fellow REG members, Char Stout.

Good afternoon Ash,
I just wanted to update you on the progress of my Masters Program, Kids Tutoring Kids. Last year we served over 150 K-6 at-risk students at San Joaquin Elementary School in Laguna Hills. By the end of the 2001-2002 school year, we had grown to a staff of four working with grades K-3 struggling tutees, grades 4-6 at-risk students/tutors, English Language Learners, and we even became involved with some third grade GATE students. Our 2000-2001 SAT 9 scores showed dramatic gains in K-2, then the gains began diminishing up through the grades.

This year budget restraints cut our staff to two people so we focus on serving just K-3. Our program is now known as Angels in Tennis Shoes: A Cross-Age Early Literacy Intervention because of the large number of seniors from nearby Leisure World who serve as our tutors. Every time President Bush makes a speech saying, “Go volunteer in your neighborhood schools,” our phone begins to ring. We have over 80 seniors, 17 just since January 7th. Many of our retired seniors who were engineers now tutor math in grades 4-6, but we had to cut our language arts tutoring to that age-level. I just learned yesterday that we are adding Teri Azar, a wonderfully creative teacher and developer of The Book Club Game, to work with our third graders again in writing and comprehension, thanks to a couple of small grants.

Our Angel volunteers come in anywhere from two hours a week to all morning all four days. Many are retired educators. I’ve begun to run feature articles about some of our tutors in the Leisure World newspaper. They are all wonderful to work with and so excited about the program. The Literacy Center is open Mondays through Thursdays, 7:45-2:00 with an Extended Learning Time Homework Club from 2-3:15.

Our teachers recommend students who, for whatever reason, are not learning through traditional classroom methods and do not qualify for special education services. I provide the Reading Results assessments for SST’s and for our Center students, and we allow the California standards to guide our remediation. Every day our students and our volunteers teach me where we are succeeding and where I need to simplify, to clarify, or to develop new strategies to meet their particular needs. We are making a significant difference in these students lives.

Saddleback Valley USD is looking more closely at our program recently. The new superintendent, Jerry Grosse and a couple board members have visited us this year. Last Tuesday, the administrator for Reading and Literacy, Catherine D’Aoust, spent over an hour with Jim Hamilton (the principal) and me, discussing the Angels program and how we might get a big grant to refine and replicate it. Next Thursday, Jean Jerome, SVUSD’s grant writer, is coming to the Center from 10-11:00 to talk about how we can increase our chances of getting the Toyota grant I’ve been sitting on for many months. I’m sure there are even more appropriate grants available for such early literacy preventive measures if we can get a large collaborative partnership together.

Last summer, I became involved with Linda Clinard’s UCI Literacy Leadership Team and CRLP Reading Results group. Today, I received an e-mail from her saying she “would definitely advocate for support at UCI in the Center for Ed. Partnerships.” She even sent a copy of our last e-mail correspondence to a mutual friend, Peggy Tunstall, who runs The Reading Team at the O.C. Department of Education.
At this point, I just had to share with you all that has happened in a short year and a half and to tell you how much I appreciate your encouragement and support in the writing of my original KTK program. If a collaborative partnership should be formed, I certainly want you, my Master's mentor, to be aware of it and even a part of it. You can find more information about the program on my Web site, www.CreativeLearningStrategies.com (although I must admit I have a problem keeping it up to date and adding new strategies that I've researched or developed).

Ash, I would be thrilled if you could come to visit the Literacy Center sometime. You will find us at the bottom of a wide stairway in a rather dark lower hallway which was formerly the school's dumping ground known as "the cave." I am told that younger students were afraid to go there. On two occasions, we had a bat fly into the Center when I left the back doors open to get a little early morning fresh air! Now, when I stand at the top of the stairs, looking down at all the different learning activities going on, I feel such gratitude for the high quality of education that I received as a result of your leadership and mentorship. Without you, my CSUF instructors, and Jim Hamilton, this program would never have become a reality for these children.

Be aware that I am sending a copy of this to Linda Clinard so she will know about your part in the creation of this program. I'll keep you posted on our progress!

Char Stout
clsstout@AOL.com

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**Faculty Footnotes**

By Kathi Bartle Angus

Graduation 2002 was a record-breaking and spectacular event. CSUF awarded degrees to over 6000 students on June 1st and 2nd. Over 130 candidates were awarded their Master of Science degree with an emphasis in Reading. This was the largest graduating class for CSUF and the largest graduating class for the Reading Department. Reading graduates also were in the majority of all Master's degrees awarded.

Instead of the usual combined Human Development and Community Service College graduation, the School of Education was able to host their own event. Faculty Emeriti, Dr. Norma Inabinette and Dr. Ruth May Siegrist read names and presented certificates while Dr. Ash Bishop, Chair of Reading, hooded each graduate at the standing room only event. Reading graduate, Linda Arroyo, began the ceremony with the singing of the national anthem. Linda was a member of our East Whittier Cohort. She teaches middle school in East Whittier and is a former member of the New York Police Department.

Candace Morales, a Fullerton campus student, was presented with the Edwin Carr Fellowship. The fellowship is presented to students who are expected to make a significant contribution to the field of reading. Past recipients include Drs. Hallie and Ruth Yopp, recent inductees to the California Reading Hall of Fame. Candace participated in internships at Fullerton College and CSUF in college reading classes and will begin a tenure-track position to teach reading classes at Long Beach City College this fall.
Additional awards were presented at the graduate reception, co-hosted by the Reading Educator’s Guild and the Reading Department. Outstanding graduate students, Guadalupe Dillon, Vince Gonzales, and Jodie Hawkins, were recognized for their scholastic achievements and leadership while in the program. In addition, REG president, Jan Bagwell, presented two scholarships to continuing graduates, Susan Newcomb and Jessica Rutan. Kudos to REG board members, Jan Bagwell, Toni Chambers, Jan Court, Jordan Fabish, JoAnne Greenbaum, and Donna Padgett for putting on such a great event.

The Reading Department at California State University, Fullerton

Presents

Reading Institute
Focus on Assessment

Friday, June 28th
5-9PM
Saturday, June 29th
9AM – 5PM

Location:
CSUF MH 264

Presentations:

Anthony V. Manzo, Ph.D
Informed Reading Instruction: Back to the Future
(The rediscovery of Diagnostic-Prescriptive Instruction and the game of high-stakes testing.)

Dr. Hallie Yopp
Assessment: A living, Breathing Part of Daily Classroom Interactions!
(The role of informal assessment and related strategies for learning goals.)

Break-Out Sessions

Interpreting Physchoeducational Test Results
Penny Chiappe

How to Build Reading Efficacy In Second Language Learner Assessment
Candace Morales
Translating your Findings into Action
Norma Inabinette

Student Cheating and Plagiarism in an Electronic Environment (Parts 1&2)
Chris Street
Cost: $150.00
Schedule: 11172

For Information on this conference, please contact Penny Chiappe
(714) 278-7971 or pchiappe@fullerton.edu

Professional Development Credit Fee: $85.00 (one unit)
Schedule: 11182
For Information on CSUF, Extended Education, please contact Faith Jennings
(714) 278-2950 or fjennings@fullerton.edu

Hancock Fund

The Hancock Fund was established to honor Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock for her contributions to the field of reading and specifically to the Reading Department. The fund is solely for use by the CSUF Reading Clinic. Over the years, the fund has supplied books and technology for use by clinicians and students. REG would like to thank the following members for their generous contributions to the Hancock Fund:

Diane Vena
Maria Duran
Janice Blanton
Cathy Knowles
Peggy Hammer
Amy Talaganis
Karen Rote
Laura Hohn

Reading Educators' Guild Newsletter Staff

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If you would like to have something published in the REG Newsletter, please contact the REG staff at kellermrs@hotmail.com.