

# THE CHANGE AGENT

Adult Education for Social Justice: News, Issues & Ideas

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The language we speak reveals many things about us: elements of our identity, patterns of our culture, our place of origin, some of our deep-seated beliefs. Because language is shared, it is also a social system of communication that is intricately bound up with power.

This issue explores some of the ways that language expresses and wields power—power with and power over. We look at this relationship from the perspective of individuals, for example: the way people may treat and judge others or be treated because of the language they use; the way language can be used for self-empowerment; the dynamics in a family where two or more languages are spoken; what is happening when we “name” others; and more.

But, we also take a look at the way social institutions—schools, public agencies, government, the media—control the use of language in society and effectively include or exclude certain groups of people in the power structure. Peppered throughout the paper you’ll find examinations of the use of Standard English in the United States, bilingual policy, the English Only movement, the “official” language of war, and stories of cultural groups that have suffered the attempted suppression of their language.

This issue is longer than most, a full 28 pages. And though there is a considerable amount of information in our pages, we have only hit the tip of the iceberg. Missing from this issue are explorations of language rights of disabled people, analysis of the loss of the world’s languages and the rapid domination of English as the international language, a close look at how and why censorship is used, strategies for communicating with respect across linguistic lines, among others.

We challenge readers to think about whether our society’s elevation of a certain kind of spoken English is just. What can it do to people’s sense of worth? How does it enable certain groups to gain acceptance, power, credibility, and access and prevent others from those same things? What does it say about our aspirations to live in a “pluralistic” country?

And we extend the challenge to reflect on our personal use of language—when do we use it to feel superior, stronger, smarter? When do we use it to humiliate, silence, ridicule? When do we use it to heal, build bridges, include, accept?

As our consciousness grows, so might our ability to create communities of equality, respect, non-dominance, and peace.

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# Critical Language Awareness

By Hilary Janks

There can be little doubt that power matters, both to people who have it and to those who do not. Because there are connections between language and power, language also matters.

In any unequal relation of power there are top dogs and underdogs. How people get to be on top in a society has to do with what that society values. It may be age or maleness or class or cleverness or a white skin. It is easier for those who have power to maintain it if they can persuade everyone in the society that there is nothing unnatural about these arrangements, that things are this way because that is the way they are meant to be.

If people consent to being powerless then the people in power need to use less force (armies, police, punishments) to maintain their power. Convincing and persuading people to consent to society's rules is often the job of families, religions, schools and the media. All these social institutions use language and it is largely in and through language that meaning is mobilized to defend the status quo.

But language is also used to challenge the status quo. By refusing to consent and by working together people can bring about change. What makes Critical Language Awareness 'critical' is its concern with the politics of meaning: the ways in which dominant meanings are maintained, challenged and changed.

When people use language to speak or write, they have to make many choices. They have to decide what words to use, whether to include adjectives and adverbs, whether to use the present, the past or the future, whether to use sexist or non-sexist pronouns, whether to join sentences or to leave them separate, how to sequence information, whether to be definite or tentative, approving or disapproving. What all

these choices mean is that written and spoken texts are constructed from a range of possible language options. . . .

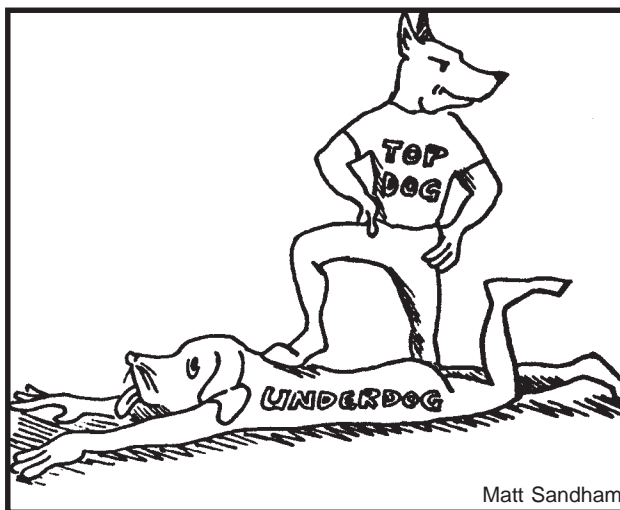
Many of the choices are social choices. Every society has conventions which govern people's behavior, including their language behavior. There are social rules controlling who should speak, for how long, when and where, and in which language. There are social norms for polite and impolite forms of speech; there are taboo words and topics. These unwritten rules of use govern what a speech community considers appropriate language behavior.

These social norms are a good indication of power relations as many of them reflect the values of the people or groups in society who have power. This is particularly true when different groups do not have equal language rights. Here is an obvious example. Where teachers have more power than their students, they can call their students what they like. They can use first names or surnames only, or even insulting names that they have made up.

Students, however, have to call teachers by their surnames and a title such as Mr. or Ms.; some students even have to call their teachers 'Sir' or 'Mistress.'

We forget that these rules of use are social conventions — they start to look natural and to seem like common sense. We forget that they are human constructions. It is easier to remember this when we compare the rules of different speech communities. Some groups think that it is rude to look a person in the eye when you speak to them. Other groups believe the opposite. Neither is more natural than the other. Both are conventions.

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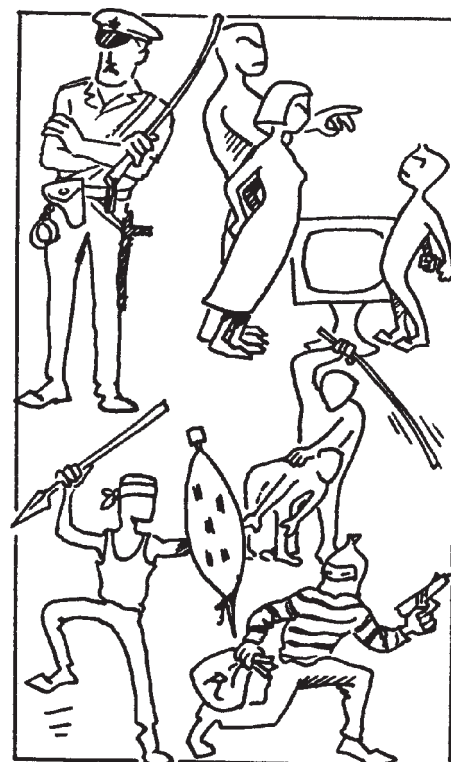


## POWER COLLAGE

Because there are many different forms that power can take, it is a good idea to stop and think about the different ways that some people have power over other people. It is also a good idea for you to think about your own power or lack of power in different situations. When do you feel that you have power? What does it enable you to do? What power do you want to have that you do not already have?

### To Make Your Collage

- ❶ In small groups talk about the different kinds of power that people have. Think about ways they have of **forcing** people to do what they want. Also think about the ways they have of getting people to do what they want them to do by **persuasion**.
- ❷ Cut out as many pictures as you can, from magazines and newspapers, that show or suggest the different kinds of power that you have talked about. As you look for pictures you may think of other kinds of power. When you have finished cutting out your pictures stick them on a large sheet of paper so that they completely cover the sheet. The collage looks more interesting if some of the pictures overlap.



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# Questions of Power

by Elsa Auerbach

## Introduction

Questions matter. The questions we ask reflect our underlying view of learners, of classrooms, and of roles in the broader social order. Likewise, the questions teachers ask themselves in developing their pedagogy reveal their views on how people acquire power, and of what their roles as educators concerned with language and power should be. In this article, I'm going to examine a range of perspectives on how language and power relate to each other and what this means for teaching. I'm going to look at the kinds of questions an observer might ask in a classroom such as: Who gets to ask questions? What kinds of questions does the teacher ask? Why does he/she ask these questions? What kinds of answers are expected? Are there right or wrong answers? Who gets to decide which answers are right? What kinds of questions do the students ask? Why do they ask them?

## How Are Language and Power Related?

Although there are many perspectives about how language works in relation to power, most agree that ideology plays a role in language usage and teaching, even when it is not acknowledged. As Paulo Freire (1968) says, language and literacy education can either serve to reinforce domination of one group over another or it can serve to challenge existing power relations. Accepted classroom practices (like who gets to ask questions and what kind of questions) are based on underlying views of how the world should be ordered and what role learners should have in the wider society. A basic question underlying all critical education (that is, education that challenges coercive power relations) is "who benefits from particular uses of language and approaches to language education?"

Beyond this basic agreement, however, there is a great deal of debate about the role of language in relation to power. Different ideologies or perspectives lead to different ways of teaching language and to different kinds of questions.

## The "Many Voices" Perspective

The first perspective, which I'm going to call the "many voices" approach, states that forcing people to adopt or acquire the language/literacy/discourses of the dominant culture is forcing them to accept domination. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), for example, used to write in English, but later began writing in his own language because he sees identity as so tied with language and schooling practices. Imposing a one-size-

fits-all model of language or literacy use robs learners who speak a minority language not just of their linguistic resources, but of their heritage, culture, and identity. This may actually lead them to resist literacy of the variety offered by schools.

Cross-cultural research of actual literacy use shows that ways of acquiring and using literacy vary from culture to culture, from context to context, and always depend on who is using them, under what conditions, and for what purposes. In this perspective, typical school literacy and discourse forms are just one of many kinds of usage, namely, the one which comes closest to the discourse of mainstream communities. Learners who speak a minority language are marginalized because this one particular discourse is valued and elevated to the status of the universal standard, not because it is inherently more valuable but because it's the discourse of those in power. People from mainstream communities are automatically advantaged because the practices that they've been socialized into are the norm in schooling. This perspective focuses on challenging the dominance of mainstream literacy practices and affirming local literacies.

What does this mean in terms of teaching? This perspective suggests starting with where people are at, investigating local discourses, literacy practices and cultural ways of using language as a bridge to new ways. Some questions that educators using this perspective ask are:

- What are learners' everyday language uses?
- What do learners already know?
- What kinds of texts and genres are valued in their cultures?
- What values are associated with them? How can they be preserved?

The point in this perspective is to build on what people know, and to incorporate their cultural knowledge into schooling. A common practice, thus, is to encourage learners to produce their own texts, in their culture-specific genres, and, often, in their own languages or dialects. For example, in one project informed by this perspective, Hmong students decided to learn to read and write in Hmong in order to preserve their first language and pass along Hmong stories to their children; in another, older Latinos produced a book about the many uses of Aloe Vera and other natural remedies, and in a third, Haitian students developed a literacy text

continued on page 4

## UNEQUAL RIGHTS TO USE LANGUAGE

Here are some suggestions to help you think about the different ways top dogs and underdogs might use language. Base your answers on careful observation of people you know.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do these rights for using language belong to people as individuals or as members of social groups that have power? Do they have language rights because of their personalities or their social positions or both? Give examples from your observations.
2. Can you think of any other inequalities in people's use of language? Do you notice any other inequalities when you observe people you know?
3. How do your different social identities affect your language rights?





## Questions of Power continued from page 3

based on Creole proverbs.

The bottom line in the “many voices” approach is the argument that power will emerge from the multiplicity of voices. Only when local ways of knowing, literacy practices, languages, and cultural knowledge are valued will literacy and education be empowering. In this perspective, claiming one’s own voice or culture becomes an act of resistance and an affirmation of identity.

### The “Voices of Power” Perspective

Other educators argue against the “many voices” perspective saying, “Get real- the fact of the matter is, certain languages and ways of using language are valued more than others, and have more power associated with them. Just sharing stories and celebrating many cultures leaves the people in power exactly where they’ve always been.” Instead they propose a “voices of power” perspective which advocates teaching learners to analyze and use powerful discourses in their own interests. Acquiring the discourses of power is seen as a tool for acquiring power.

One version of this perspective, the genre approach, popular in England and Australia, argues that power is manifested through the ways that texts are constructed; educators must teach students to look at how texts work and how language is used in texts. In this approach, students learn to identify specific types of texts (newspaper articles, instructions, editorials, advertisements), analyze their structural and linguistic features, and generate their own texts that conform to the conventions of each genre. The message sent by this approach is that mastery of the genres of power will yield access to power.

Other versions of this perspective, critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness perspectives, take this argument a step further. Proponents invite learners to interrogate texts with questions like:

- Who produces this text? (what institution?)
- For whom is it produced? Who are the expected readers?
- Why has this text been produced?
- Why is this topic being written about?
- How is the topic being written about? Why are certain words chosen? How do these language choices shape readers’ perceptions?
- What other ways of writing about it are there? What is left out?

In this perspective, power arises from being able to critically analyze the language of texts and learn to use this language on one’s own behalf.

### The “Social Change” Perspective

Another group of educators, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, argues that neither the “many voices” nor the “voices of power” perspective go far enough. To those who would affirm cultural identity, they say it is also crucial to look at institutions and how they function to silence learners. To those who would critically analyze texts and explicitly teach the language of power, they would say, it’s a mistake to claim that acquiring the discourse of power will actually lead to acquiring power: experience, history and research show that other factors like gender and race are as important as language (if not more so) in determining access to power. History shows that it is organized struggle for better working conditions, and against injustices rather than mastery of discourses, which wins people social and economic gains.

So the bottom line in this perspective is using language to analyze and change conditions that oppress people. The premise is that education needs to make the social organization of power (not just the language of power) explicit.

In this approach, language and literacy education is framed by the struggles that participants are involved in; it is concerned with developing language in service of addressing critical social problems that learners have identified. Questions might include:

- What are the critical problems that learners are struggling with in their lives?
- What are the sources of these problems?
- Who is affected? How are they affected?
- Who benefits from the existing situation?
- What can be done about it? How can we act to change things?
- What information and skills do we need in order to address the problem?
- What institutions or organizations can be resources for us?
- Who will our actions help? Who will they hurt? What will the consequences of each strategy be?

### Language and Power — 3 Perspectives

<b>Many Voices</b>	Says power will emerge from a multiplicity of voices.
<b>Voices of Power</b>	Says mastering language of power will get you access to power.
<b>Social Change</b>	Says language should be used to analyze and change the conditions that oppress people.

Because of the concern with social action in this approach, learning takes place not just in classrooms, but in women’s centers and union halls, in struggles for tenants’ rights, land control and access to health care. Stories are told not to validate experience but to gain a critical understanding of its social nature so that participants can move toward action for change. For example, a parents’ group in Los Angeles which began after uprisings in L.A., used their classes to explore their fears and concerns about what was happening in their communities; they then wrote a book reflecting not just their experiences, but their analysis of what was happening and why, and distributed the book in their community to prompt further dialogue (Orellana, 1996).

The point is that sites of struggle can become sites of learning. All of these projects create a space where the impetus for affirming many voices and the impetus for acquiring dominant voices can push against each other, inform each other, and conflict with each other.

### So What?

I started this article by saying questions matter. Learning to ask questions which are informed by a collaborative perspective of power takes practice. I want to end this article by inviting you to engage in a questioning exercise. Start by choosing a context in your life (your own teaching, your learning, your reading of a text, your teaching of a text). Look at it in terms of the questions posed at the beginning of this article: what kinds of questions are asked, who asks them, and what do they show about power relations? If you’re working with a text, what questions are you asking (or is the text asking of you)?

But then go a little further and try looking at the kinds of questions underneath the surface. Each of the approaches outlined here rests on a different view of the relation between language and power and a different set of key questions. Which kinds of questions seem important in the context you’re examining? If you’re a teacher, what questions are you asking about your learners and their lives? Are you asking questions about their language, culture, or literacy uses? Are you asking questions about the language of texts? Are you asking questions about or investigating community issues with students? If you’re working with a text, how do the questions you’re asking position the reader? Can you identify your own underlying approach to the relationship between language and power?

Then take it a step further. Which of the approaches and questions outlined in this article do you find useful or interesting? Can you identify questions that you don’t usually ask that you might want to try? What questions are missing from these lists? And, of course, what happens when you begin to ask new questions, or change the questioning dynamic? Which of these questions or changes seem to make a difference? What difference do they make?

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## The Black Hat Speaks!

Language & Power in the Workplace

by Erik Jacobson

In any ESOL class that is attuned to issues of language and power, the question of language use in the workplace is sure to surface. It is common for classroom discussions to focus on what the linguistic requirements are for certain types of jobs, and on how language is (mis)used as a measure of ability. Some classes investigate issues of linguistic racism in the workplace, such as when immigrant workers are prevented from using their native languages even while on break. These are all valuable conversations to have, and indeed, my students and I have discussed these types of topics. However, my students often seem a bit anxious about this type of activity. They note that while they like talking about these things, they also want to “do more grammar.” To facilitate a shift from discussing language and power at the societal level to a study of specific elements of language, I ask my students to focus on how grammatical usage helps to mark power dynamics in face to face interactions (whether in the workplace or anyplace else). For example, here are two sample passages I have written and used in my class.

- 1) John: Hi, Marie. Can I ask you to do something for me?  
 Marie: Sure, what?  
 John: Susan is sick. Can you work until 8 PM?  
 Marie: I guess. I have to call my family to tell them.  
 John: Thanks a lot.
- 2) Paul: Hi, Marie. Susan is sick. Don't go home yet. Stay until 8 PM.  
 Marie: I don't know if I can.  
 Paul: Well, I don't have anybody else. You'll have to.

I have my students read the two passages, and then share their reactions with me. Typically students tell me that John is a good boss, and that Paul is a bad boss. When I ask them why they think this, they point to the fact that John asks Marie questions, rather than using the imperative, and that he thanks her. Paul's use of the imperative shows him to be trying to use his power to force a worker to work overtime.

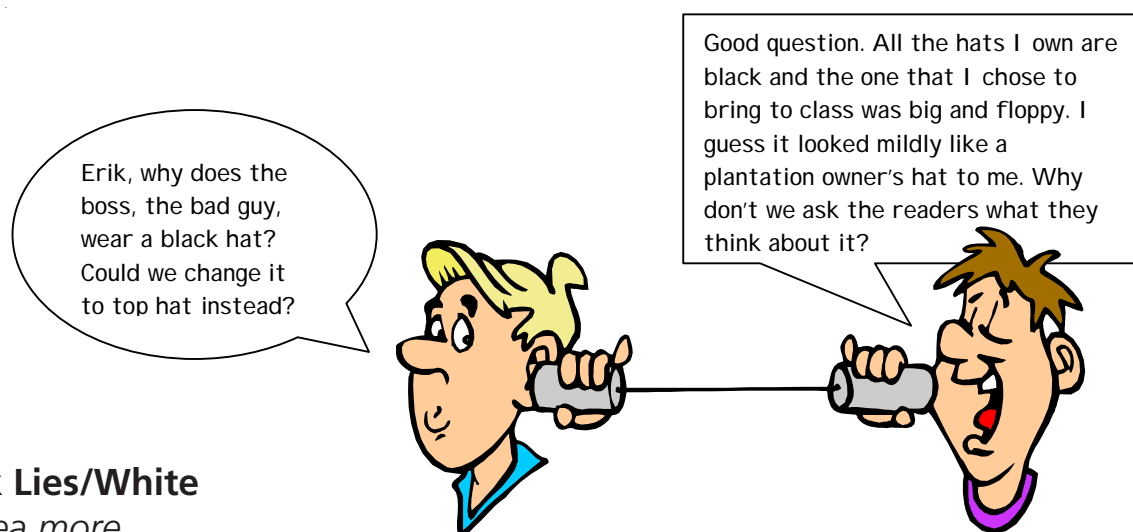
My students tell me that they experience both types of interactions, and that it is great to be able to dissect them in class. I then ask students to think about the kinds of interactions they have at work, and ask them how their own on-the-job experience might give them other clues about how language and power are related. For example, a number of students have noted that they are never called by name when interacting with staff members above them in the workplace hierarchy. Many of my current students are nurse's aides, and they explained to me that nurses use a certain tone and vocabulary in order to talk down to them. More striking was their feeling that doctors don't even talk to them at all.

After cataloging a number of language practices that serve to mark power relations in the workplace, I have my students engage in a bit of role-playing. I bring a big black hat to class, and explain that whoever wears it is the boss, and that the rest of us (myself included) are the workers. Typically, the students need little coaxing, and as soon as the hat is on their head they begin to try their best to sound like the worst boss they can imagine. They start with the imperative, then move on to other grammatical devices, such as tag questions (“You don't know what you are doing, *do you?*”). They also explore non-grammatical and non-syntactical aspects of language use (such as tone, and the strategic use of silence). Many of them add a physical element, and swagger around the room in an imitation of their boss' bluster and contempt for workers. Other students fall over laughing at these performances, and egg on the newly minted “bosses” to even worse boss-like behavior. Once a given student has channeled the boss long enough, they pass the hat to another student. I have fond memories of one student who put her hands on her waist and yelled, “Work harder! Work harder!” Of course, it was really this student who was now working harder. By pulling together her sensitivities about language and power with an increased awareness of how language is used in interactions, this student was really making progress in her production and use of spoken English. For this reason, I believe that when *the black hat* speaks, students' concerns about the need to focus on grammar can be combined with the desire to talk about larger societal issues.

Erik Jacobson teaches ESOL at the Haitian American Public Health Initiative in Mattapan, MA. He is co-author of “Creating Authentic Materials for the Adult Literacy Classroom,” forthcoming from NCSALL at World Education.

## INCLUDING YOU IN THE CONVERSATION

Cara, the co-editor, was reflecting on another article we included in this issue that looks at how racial stereotyping is supported, often unconsciously, by language—and that prompted a question. She decided to ask Erik, the author of this article. And we'd like to ask you what you think.



Please check out the activity **Black Lies/White Lies** on page 26 to explore this idea more.



# By Whose Standards Do We Speak?

by Silja Kallenbach

## Language and Identity

Our identities as human beings are bound up with language. The language we speak, and how we speak it, express who we are and where we come from. Take away a person's language and you take away a part of her sense of self, and her culture. This is as true for the hard-of-hearing person who uses sign language as it is for me, who learned first to speak Finnish.

The language we speak is bound up with our experience and environment. The word for the same reality feels different in different languages. Eva Hoffman gives a good example of this in her book, *Lost in Translation*, which is about her experience of immigrating to the United States from Poland at the age of 13. She writes, "The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke" (p.106). Language comes to life through experiences that take place in specific environments. This implies that in an ESOL class, in order to learn new vocabulary and expressions, we need to have experiences that make them memorable.

## Language Prejudice

Different environments, situations and people call for different ways of using language. There are more or less formal ways of using language. Most of us have learned to speak more formally to people in positions of authority than with our friends and family. We have learned that we can be judged by the variation of the language we speak. But we might not realize just how much the way we speak affects how we and our children are perceived and judged.

In one study, student teachers were asked to judge eight hypothetical school children's intelligence, self-confidence, and whether they were good students. For each student, the teachers were given a photograph of the student, a sample of schoolwork (an essay and a drawing), and a tape-recorded sample of the student's speech. Each piece of information was based on a real child, but the pieces were mixed so that each child would have an equal number of positive and negative judgments. The surprising result was that the way the students spoke affected the teachers' judgments more than the students' schoolwork, or how they looked. For each teacher, it was the students' way of speaking that determined a favorable or unfavorable impression. Students whose speech reflected a lower social class were judged more negatively.

## Dialects and Standard Language

Most people speak some kind of a dialect. Dialects are variations of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary that are specific to the language spoken in a particular region or by a specific group of people. In the United States, for example, there are many different dialects. The language of someone from the deep South is usually recognizable as being different from that spoken in

the Northern states. Many African-Americans speak a variation of English called Ebonics. People of French-Canadian origin in northern Maine speak a dialect that is influenced by French. And so on.

Dialects contrast with what a country considers its standard language. This is the language of dictionaries and grammar books. It is what schools teach and by which they measure students' achievement. Some dialects match more closely what is considered the standard language than others.

But who decides what is standard language? Research shows that it is people with more social prestige. Naturally, they choose the variation they speak, in most cases, the language of the educated and the wealthy. It is this language that then becomes the standard by which all speech is judged, at least by those in power.

## The Myth of Superiority of Standard Language

The notion that one way of speaking is better than another is culturally learned. Yet, most of us have bought the myth that standard language is somehow better than a dialect. Linguists, people who study languages, say that no language or dialect is inherently superior to another.

All languages and dialects are systematic and complex. They have their own sets of rules, and reflect and serve the needs of the community that speaks them. Their vocabularies, for example, reflect the preoccupations of the speakers. So, the Inuits of Alaska have many words for different kinds of snow because they live in a cold climate and need to be able to distinguish types of snow for their survival. Many Native American languages do not distinguish between the past, present and future tense because in those cultures time is a more indefinite and fluid concept. Computer-related vocabulary is primarily in English because that technology developed quickly in our culture. Yet one hundred years ago we did not have any computer vocabulary in English. A mouse was still just a rodent, and memory was something you lost with old age. Languages are alive, and like all living things they change and evolve.

## Conclusion

Each person has to consider the consequences associated with choosing to speak one dialect or another. We need to figure out how to preserve the languages and dialects that make up our sense of identity. At the same time, we need to be savvy to use the language of power when the situation calls for it. And we need to question why one way of speaking carries more power than another.

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## RAMON'S STORY

My name is Ramon. I work in a factory with a lot of Americans. One afternoon a few months ago, one of my American co-workers started a conversation with me during break time.

"Hey, Ramon. Are you the only child in your family?"

"No, I have three brothers."

"What are their names?"

"Carmen, Maria, and Jose."

When I said that, the other workers started laughing. One of them called me "stupid." I walked away from them with a sick feeling in my stomach. I didn't know why they'd laughed or why they'd called me "stupid," but I felt confused and ashamed.

For the rest of the afternoon, I thought about the reaction of my co-workers to the way I spoke English. I had been in this country for less than a year. Not having any money to go to school to learn English, I listened to the way the Americans at work spoke, and I tried to imitate them. Of course I made a lot of mistakes, but my co-workers were not very helpful. I could tell that they didn't like repeating for me things I didn't understand. When I made a mistake in grammar or pronunciation, they made strange faces or made fun of me by imitating my mistakes and my accent.

That night I told my older brother about my experience at work. He showed me my mistake. While in my native Spanish "hermanos" could sometimes mean both "brothers" and "sisters," it could only mean "brothers" in English. Then I understood why the Americans had called me "stupid." They thought I didn't know the difference between a brother and a sister. The shame I'd felt that

afternoon at work returned.

That same night I decided that I didn't want to suffer any more shame and humiliation because of the way I spoke English. I didn't want to hear the laughter of other any more. I made up my mind not to speak English at work unless I absolutely had to or unless I was sure that what I was saying was absolutely correct.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Where does Ramon work?
2. Who does he work with?
3. How does Ramon feel when he discovers the mistake he made?
4. What does he decide to do? What else could he have done?
5. Who has power at the beginning of the story?
6. Who has power at the end?
7. Do you know anyone who had a similar experience?
8. What did they do?

Try doing a role-play of the story with the different endings that your students invent.

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# Learning About Words at Harvard

by Richard Mora

“Where are you from?” That is what fellow first-year students asked me when I arrived at Harvard College in September of 1995. I paused before answering, “Los Angeles.” I am sure that some considered my hesitation odd and perhaps rude, but it was not a dismissive act on my part. I had to stop and think about my answer because the question “Where are you from?” meant something completely different back home. On the urban streets of Los Angeles, gang members who want to know if you are a member of a rival gang ask, “Where are you from?” For years, growing up, I answered this question by saying, “Nowhere.” I relied heavily on this one word to help me survive a number of potentially deadly interactions. At Harvard, though, “nowhere” did not have the same power. There it was simply another word.

During my second week, as I sat around with a group of students eating lunch, one of them asked me, “Where did you summer?” I was not sure what he meant. I had never heard anyone use ‘summer’ as a verb. So, with a confused look on my face, I said, “What?” A young man sitting across from me clarified things by rephrasing the question, “Where did you *spend the summer*?” I sat there for a few seconds fascinated by how the word ‘summer’ in this context served to reveal an individual’s class background, namely mine. Unlike many of the students, I did not travel to resorts or head overseas during the summers. The child of working-class parents, I mostly stayed home. So, I answered, “Los Angeles,” knowing that in the small exchange I had learned a lot, including how other people live.

Growing up, I enjoyed reading. In college, however, I did not always like reading the assigned material. Often, as I read for class, I felt excluded by the books and articles. This feeling frustrated and angered me. I knew that the authors most likely did not intend to exclude me. However, that made no difference to me because the end result was the same—I was missing out on something because of their confusing writing style which relied on big technical words, or jargon.

My anger grew and I became more determined to understand the jargon that I was being introduced to on a daily basis. As I read and reread, I made a point of breaking down what the authors were saying. I replaced their ‘big words’ with my own ‘little words.’ I did this with the help of my dictionary and thesaurus. (Every family should have a dictionary and a thesaurus).

Something interesting happened when I made sense of the jargon. I realized that sometimes an author uses jargon to hide the weaknesses of his or her arguments. In other words, he or she uses a lot of ‘big words,’ but is not saying much. After I was able to see beyond the ‘smoke and mirrors,’ I grew into a more confident reader, and my anger subsided.

Besides reading, a large part of college is attending lectures and taking notes. Like other students, I filled lots of notebooks with my scribbles. While some students shared their notes with one another, I hardly ever

did. It was not that I did not want to help others, but that I knew they would not have understood what I had written. In order to make my professors’ lectures less mysterious, I used words from the different (linguistic) worlds that I move in—English, Spanish, Chicano slang, and Spanglish. By writing my notes in languages I felt comfortable

## Big Words Translated

In the following complicated passage, Pierre Bourdieu, a brilliant French sociologist, defines his term *habitus*:

“The conditioning associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures pre-disposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations . . .”

Basically, *habitus* refers to behaviors and views that are shaped by a person’s class background, without the person’s knowing it, and are often passed on to the next generations.

with, I was able to bring myself into the material and make it my own.

Looking back upon my college years, I realize that I succeeded academically because I pushed myself to understand how others utilize words, some of which at first were as foreign to me as the whole Harvard environment. As I gradually understood how other people use language, I also began to value my own words, and my many voices, that much more. Therefore, I would say that my experience at Harvard taught me a great deal about different worlds, including the many that are at the tip of my tongue.

*Richard Mora received a B.A. in Sociology from Harvard and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy at Harvard University.*

## READING QUESTIONS

- 1) What and where is Harvard?
- 2) Where was Richard’s home?
- 3) How were Harvard and Richard’s LA neighborhood different? How do you imagine Richard felt in his first months at Harvard? Why?
- 4) Why did Richard grow angry while reading?
- 5) How did Richard “translate” his readings and lectures?
- 6) Imagine yourself at college. What can you learn from Richard that would help you succeed?

# Teaching Standard English: Whose Standard?

by Linda Christensen

English teachers must know when to correct and how to correct — and I use that word uneasily. Take Fred, for example. Fred entered my freshman class unwilling to write. Every day during writing time I’d find Fred doodling pictures of Playboy bunnies. When I sat down and asked him why he didn’t write, he said he couldn’t.

I explained to him that in this class his writing couldn’t be wrong because we were just practicing our writing until we found a piece we wanted to polish, in the same way that he practiced football every day after school, but only played games on Fridays. His resistance lasted for a couple of weeks. Around him other students struggled with their writing, shared it with the class on occasion and heard positive comments. Certainly the writing of his fellow students was not intimidating.

On October 1st, after reading the story, “Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara (1972), about trusting people in our lives, Fred wrote for the first time: “I remember my next door neighbor trusted me with some

money that she owed my grandmother. She owed my grandmother about 25 dollars.” Fred didn’t make a lot of errors. In this first piece of writing it looked like he had basic punctuation figured out — except for the odd capitals in the middle of the sentence. He didn’t misspell any words. And he didn’t make any usage errors. Based on this sample, he appeared to be a competent writer.

However, the biggest problem with Fred’s writing was that he didn’t make mistakes. This piece demonstrates his discomfort with writing. He wasn’t taking any risks. He wrote to avoid errors instead of writing to communicate or think on paper.

When more attention is paid to the way something is written or said than to what is said, students’ words and thoughts become devalued. Students learn to be silent, to give as few words as possible for teacher criticism. . . .

continued on page 8



# Trilingualism

by Judith Baker

In my design of lessons [for my students], I have been working on the theory that there are at least three forms of the English language that most Americans need to learn in order to lead socially fulfilling and economically viable lives [at this time in history]:

- “home” English or dialect, which most students learn at home, and recent immigrants often learn from peers, and which for first and second generation immigrants may be a combination of English and their mother tongue
- “formal” or academic English, which is learned by many in school, from reading, and from the media although it may also be learned in well-educated families
- “professional” English, the particular language of one’s profession, which is mostly learned in college or on the job or, [in my school], in vocational education

I think I can make this “trilingualism” explicit and if I can motivate students to want to learn these “languages,” these three forms of English, then I can enable them to master the actual mechanical differences between them. . . .

One way we enter this examination in my classroom is to actually study the home languages students bring into class. We find patterns of speech, rules of grammar, vocabulary, tonal features, and emotional characteristics of language which we note, label, discuss and eventually compare to the features of what we call “formal” English. I have done this successfully by asking groups of students to present the class with a good, complete description of how their members usually speak at home and with friends. . . .

Here’s a glimpse into how this project has worked. Dwayne [who was born in Boston] is an African-American seventeen-year-old whose family came from rural South Carolina. Dwayne taped an hour of his father’s evening conversations with the family in the kitchen, on the phone, and in front of the television. He played the tape for the class. Dwayne and the group [of students he was working with] noticed that his father tends to speak very slowly, with a musical tone which goes up and down more than an octave. Dwayne’s father often clips word endings, so much so that often the class did not understand what he was saying on the tape, forcing Dwayne to translate. Students in Dwayne’s



working group noticed that Dwayne shares some of his father’s speech patterns, although if they’d not heard the tape, they would not have labeled them “Southern.” An interesting outgrowth of Dwayne’s study of his father’s speech was that he became interested in his own spelling. I think he realized that such habits as leaving the ‘s’ off plural nouns were in some way related to his family’s home language. . . .

As students study their home languages in my class, several very valuable things happen, not all of which I—or they—anticipate. One of the most wonderful for me is that I learn about their languages. . . . For my students, the validation of their home language, which comes from studying it, allows them to feel comfortable with language study in general. It becomes just as acceptable to ask, “How do you say this in formal English?” as it is to ask, “How do you say this with your friends?” or “How do you say this in your grandmother’s kitchen?”

*Judith Baker is a teacher in a large technical/vocational high school in Boston.*

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## Teaching Standard English continued from page 7

Fred can write better now. He and his classmates can feel comfortable and safe sharing their lives or discussing literature and the world. They can even understand that they need to ask “Who benefits?” to get a better perspective on a problem. But still when they leave my class or this school, some people will judge them by how their subjects and verbs line up. So I teach Fred the rules. It’s the language of power in this country, and I would be cheating him if I pretended otherwise.

I teach Fred that language, like tracking, functions as part of a gatekeeping system in our country. Who gets managerial jobs, who works at banks and who works at fast food restaurants, who gets into what college and who gets into college at all, are decisions linked to the ability to use Standard English. So how do we teach kids to write with honesty and passion about their world and get them to study the rules of the cash language? We go back to our study of society. We ask: Who made the rules that govern how we speak and write? Did Ninh’s family and Fred’s family and LaShonda’s family all sit down together and decide on these rules? Who already talks like this and writes like this? Who has to learn how to change the way they talk and write? Why?

We make up our own tests that speakers of Standard English would find difficult. We read articles, stories, poems written in Standard English and those written in home language. We listen to videotapes of people speaking. Most kids like the sound of their home language better. They like the energy, the poetry, and the rhythm of the language. We determine when and why people shift. We talk about why it might be necessary to learn Standard English.

Asking my students to memorize the rules without asking who makes the rules, who enforces the rules, who benefits from the rules, who loses from the rules, who uses the rules to keep some in and keep others

out, legitimates a social system that devalues my students’ knowledge and language. Teaching the rules without reflection also underscores that it’s OK for others—“authorities”—to dictate something as fundamental and as personal as the way they speak. Further, the study of Standard English without critique encourages students to believe that if they fail, it is because they are not smart enough or didn’t work hard enough. They learn to blame themselves. If they get poor SAT scores, low grades on term papers or essays because of language errors, fail teacher entrance exams, they will internalize the blame; they will believe they did not succeed because they are inferior instead of questioning the standard of measurement and those making the standards.

We must teach students how to match subjects and verbs, how to pronounce lawyer, because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, have to use the language of the powerful to be heard. But, in addition, we need to equip them to question an educational system that devalues their life and their knowledge. If we don’t, we condition them to a pedagogy of consumption where they will consume the knowledge priorities and products that have been decided and manufactured without them in mind.

It took me years . . . to discover that what I said was more important than how I said it. Years to understand that my words, my family’s words, weren’t wrong, weren’t bad—they were just the words of the working class. For too long, I felt inferior when I spoke. I knew the voice of my childhood crept out, and I confused that with ignorance. It wasn’t. I just didn’t belong to the group who made the rules. I was an outsider, a foreigner in their world.

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# No Speak English

by Sandra Cisneros

Mamacita is the big mama of the man across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamasota*, but I think that's mean.

The man saved his money to bring her here. He saved and saved because she was alone with the baby boy in that country. He worked two jobs. He came home late and he left early. Every day.

Then one day Mamacita and the baby boy arrived in a yellow taxi. The taxi door opened like a waiter's arm. Out stepped a tiny pink shoe, a foot soft as a rabbit's ear, then the thick ankle, a flutter of hips, fuchsia roses and green perfume. The man had to pull her, the taxicab driver had to push. Push, pull. Push, pull. Poof!

All at once she bloomed. Huge, enormous, beautiful to look at, from the salmon-pink feather on the tip of her hat down to the little rosebuds of her toes. I couldn't take my eyes off her tiny shoes.

Up, up, up the stairs she went with the baby boy in a blue blanket, the man carrying her suitcases, her lavender hatboxes, a dozen boxes of satin high heels. Then we didn't see her.

Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words.

She knows to say: *He's not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes, and *Holy smokes*. I don't know where she learned this, but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me.

My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew. He doesn't eat hamandeggs anymore.

Whatever the reasons, whether she is fat, or can't climb the stairs, or is afraid

of English, she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull.

Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would.

Sometimes the man gets disgusted. He starts screaming and you can hear it all the way down the street.

Ay, she says, she is sad.

Oh, he says, not again.

¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo? She asks.

¡Ay, Caray! We *are* home. This *is* home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!

¡Ay! Mamacita, who does not belong, every once in a while lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country.

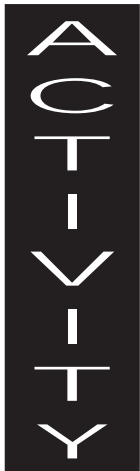
And then to break her heart forever, the baby boy who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V.

No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no as if she can't believe her ears.



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## EXPLORING STANDARD ENGLISH



- 1) Examine how you speak differently by tape recording (with permission, of course) your discussions with people at 2 or more of the following places:
  - ◆ Home
  - ◆ Work
  - ◆ School
  - ◆ Community events
  - ◆ Church
- 2) Come up with a name for the type of English you each speak.
- 3) Call the class's attention to specific features of your speech by naming some of the examples of your speech, if those examples are different from formal English. Start by looking at the list to the right, giving examples of these things IF you commonly do them.
  - Leave out certain sounds
  - Use regional words or expressions (or even teenage usages)
  - Use slang
  - Use words and phrases in new, creative ways
  - Use of other languages instead of English
  - Use of other languages mixed in with English
  - Switch objective and subjective cases of pronouns
  - Use double negatives
  - Leave the 's' off third person singular present tense verbs
  - Use the participle instead of the past tense verbs
  - Special tone of voice you use in special situations
  - Accents or use of tone
  - Use of your hands, eyes, and other "body language"
  - Use of swear words, curse words or other formally "inappropriate" language (When and why do you use them, if you do?)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you shift dialects depending on who you are talking to? How do you speak differently in different settings?
2. What stereotypes are associated with speakers of different dialects? Why do you think that is?
3. If you speak another language, how does it make you feel when you speak it?
4. What examples can you think of that show that language is constantly changing?
5. What do you think about the idea that no language or dialect is superior to another?

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# Mother Tongue

by Amy Tan

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, “The intersection of memory upon imagination” and “There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus”—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: “Not waste money that way.” My husband was with us as well, and he didn’t notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It’s because over the twenty years we’ve been together I’ve often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with. . . . You should know that my mother’s expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the *Forbes* report, listens to *Wall Street Week*, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine’s books with ease—all kinds of things I can’t begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I’ve been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as “broken” or “fractured” English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I’ve heard other terms used, “limited English,” for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people’s perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother’s “limited” English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. . . .

I think my mother’s English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person’s developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were

never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B’s, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A’s and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, “Even though Tom was \_\_\_\_\_, Mary thought he was \_\_\_\_\_.” And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, “Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming,” with the grammatical structure “even though” limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn’t get answers like, “Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous.” Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that. . . .

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother’s English, about achievement tests. Because lately I’ve been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can’t begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me. . . .

Fortunately, for reasons I won’t get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagine to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English or a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

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# Being Bilingual A Theme for an Adult Literacy Class

by Krista Shaffer

## The Process

In an adult literacy class I taught in Fremont, CA, we decided to choose a theme to pursue as a group. Through class discussion about our life maps, the pictorial representations of our lives, we learned more about each other. I recorded common themes that came up in student presentations such as *immigration, separation, language, school, independence, and freedom*. The class decided that they wanted the theme to be language since they were all speakers of other languages who were learning English.

Through discussion of our life experiences and through reading poems and a short story about speaking more than one language (see Resource List), we explored how it feels to speak, read and write our first language; how it feels to speak, read and write a second language; and how it feels to move between languages. Based on the class discussion, students cut out pictures from magazines and placed them under the heading of *first language or second language or moving in between languages*. Students also wrote and included captions for the pictures about feelings they portrayed.

We then set the collage aside as we explored the following questions related to language: What does it mean to be bilingual? How is language related to power? Is it necessary to have the ability to speak, read and write English fluently in order to be treated equally in the U.S.? Is it the only factor that determines whether someone is treated equally?

We looked into these questions by defining what being bilingual meant to each of us and by writing about our experiences of becoming bilingual. We looked into language's relationship to power by discussing, acting out and writing about a life experience of one student who had trouble advocating for her rights as a tenant in part because of her lack of confidence in speaking English.

After these discussions, we returned to the collage and talked about what we wanted to add to it to make it more complete. Students as a group edited the sentences they had written, focusing on grammatical and spelling issues. We then decided to write paragraphs that described each area of the collage: what it's like to communicate in your first language, in your second language and to travel in between. We wrote these paragraphs too as a group, drawing on ideas that we had discussed over the course of the session. After we wrote these paragraphs, we added them to the collage which we then entitled "Feelings and Thoughts When We Try to Be Bilingual." (See below.)

## Feelings and Thoughts When We Try To Be Bilingual

### Speaking our first language:

We have feelings and thoughts when we speak our first language. We are proud to speak our first language because we feel powerful and confident to communicate and understand each other. We can make friends and have fun. We can express everything we want without effort. We can be heard when we talk and we can speak up for our rights. We can prove we are qualified and prepared for whatever we want to do.

### Speaking a second language:

We are uncomfortable and upset when we speak English not very well. We have to think the correct words before we start to talk. We feel worried and scared when we try to communicate. We have to repeat ourselves often and ask, "Excuse me? I don't understand you!!" That's very frustrating. Sometimes people don't pay attention to us when they notice we don't speak very well. They take advantage of the language and sometimes they discriminate towards us.

### Moving in between languages:

We are nervous and worried when we start speaking a new language. Sometimes people misunderstand what we say because we cannot express ourselves very well. That makes us feel frustrated and scared. But with the times we get better and better and we become bilingual people and we feel very happy.

To be bilingual for us is very important in life. It gives us more opportunities when we try to find a job; it gives us the opportunity to make friends and understand people with different cultures and know about other countries. To be bilingual is an advantage in life. That means we can be able to express ourselves in two languages.

## The Results

The collage began as a way to visually represent our feelings about communicating. It emerged into a representation of what it means to be bilingual and how language has the paradoxical potential to make us feel both disempowered and empowered.

## An Extension

If I were to explore this theme again in a class, I would broaden the discussion to include not only what it means to be bilingual, but also what it means to be bidialectal, or able to communicate in more than one dialect. Whether or not their first language is English, many students feel that they are linguistic outsiders to the world of formal, written English. Even those whose first language is English may have to learn a whole new dialect when they want to master formal written English, which is different than the dialect most speak in their day-to-day lives.

Krista Shaffer is a teacher at the Write to Read Program of Alameda County Library, California.

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## Speaking for Others

by Jacyntha England

when shall I speak for you? when your tongue stumbles  
over words I know,  
have always known and always will,  
from a childhood of learning  
the careful, constant pressures of i before e?

or later, when a roomful of strangers  
turns to stare at your stutters,  
sympathy and disgust in trained teacher smiles,  
the silence between your lips like wads of cotton  
dipped in mercury and then soon forgotten?

is this when I should decide  
that your words need translation,  
cannot be taken as your own,  
and that this language called English  
should remain mine alone?

or does *speaking* lie someplace  
in the quiet surrendering of words  
we might once have tried to steal?

speak to me, *amiga, amie, rafiki*:  
speak with your song, your eyes, your dance.

tell me the story of  
what language has done to you,  
what words might mean to you,  
and how you need me to see you.

then let this telling bring new words  
that speak from both of us,  
until we find, make, teach, sing, write . . .  
a language that we can share.

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## Analyzing Public Policy: Bilingual Education Reform

by Lorna Rivera

*In this article I share some activities I do with my adult learners to analyze public policy issues. I use the “English for the Children” bilingual education reform law to illustrate how to debate an important public policy issue in the classroom.*

### Background

In November 2002, after months of heated public debate about bilingual education reform, Massachusetts voters approved a referendum that mandated the immersion of bilingual students in English-only classes for one academic year. Many of the adult learners in the College of Public and Community Service (CPCS) at UMass-Boston are immigrants who have a personal stake in the reform of bilingual education so this provided me with an excellent opportunity to work with my students on analyzing a public policy issue. I found that, while many of them speak English as a Second Language and some of their children are enrolled in bilingual education classes, my students held different opinions about the law to mandate English-only classes for bilingual students.

### Process

As we examined the proposed laws to reform bilingual education, I asked my students to analyze different arguments about bilingual education drawn from a variety of sources. They read newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces on web sites about bilingual education. They were also required to attend legislative hearings, political debates, protest rallies, and listen to campaign speeches about bilingual education. Despite an extensive body of research about bilingual education that spans decades, misinformation and racist ideology dominated the bilingual education debate inside and outside of our classroom. Some of the questions that were raised in debates included: Should all Americans speak the same language? Do immigrant families resist learning English? Should immigrant children be taught to read and write in their own language, and should public funding support these efforts? Does bilingual education segregate students and/or cause them to have a lower self-esteem? Do bilingual education students perform less well on tests than their classmates who are in regular classes?

In the paragraphs that follow I will offer examples to illustrate how we addressed some of our public policy analysis questions.

### Policy Analysis Question #1: *What is the history of bilingual education policy?*

A good activity to do with students is to develop a timeline that outlines the history of bilingual education in the United States, and documents important changes in policies and implementation of policies. We discussed, for example, how in the United States there is a long history of conflict regarding immigration public policies. Bilingual education has always been a “politicized” issue. With increasing immigration to the United States in the mid-1800s through the 1900s, English language proficiency became a defining characteristic of what it meant to be an American. In 1971, Massachusetts became the first state to enact a law promoting bilingual education.

### Policy Analysis Question #2: *How is bilingual education defined?*

We learned that the term “bilingual education” has many different interpretations and definitions. There are a variety of different bilingual education program models and the major differences among these different bilingual education models pertain to when the transition to English should happen and how much instruction in a particular language should take place. In Massachusetts, the bilingual education referendum was sponsored by Ron Unz, a California businessman who sponsored similar referenda in other states. The law requires that all bilingual children enroll in “sheltered immersion instruction” in which all instruction and materials must be in English-only for one academic year. In my classes I shared information from research studies about effective bilingual education models, and my students compared and contrasted the findings from these studies. Most research shows that bilingual students who are enrolled in two-way bilingual education have the highest academic achievements when compared to their peers. The two-way programs are both better for the whole learner and for teaching English. In the majority of two-way bilingual programs about half the students are native speakers of English and the others have only a limited proficiency in that language. The instruction typically begins with 90% instruction in non-English and 10% in English with increasing instruction to 50% English and 50% non-English.

### **In teaching students to analyze public policies, I ask them to examine the following questions:**

- ★ What is the history of the problems (or issues) addressed by the policy?
- ★ How are key issues or concepts defined or interpreted?
- ★ Who will benefit if the policy is implemented? Who stands to lose if the policy is implemented?
- ★ Why do certain individuals or groups take particular positions on an issue?
- ★ What are the major moral and/or political beliefs underlying each position? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each position?
- ★ What evidence do people use to support their arguments?
- ★ How is language used to persuade people to support or oppose the policy? How are certain words used to affect people’s emotions?
- ★ How are statistics and other numerical data used to convince people to be in favor or against the policy?

Researchers have found that two-way bilingual programs improved relationships among students and enhanced cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

### Policy Analysis Question #3: *What are the major moral and /or political beliefs underlying each position?*

As we listened to debates about bilingual education we noticed how opponents of bilingual education argued that hundreds of immigrants who came to the United States during the mid-1800s through the 1900s “did just fine” without bilingual education. However, I showed students that there were, in fact, bilingual education programs during this time period. The claim that these European immigrants “did just fine” without bilingual education also does not consider the vast changes in the U.S. economy in the last century. Only a generation ago immigrants with low basic skills could earn a living wage. Because today’s jobs are polarized into low-paying, low-skilled jobs or high paying, high-skilled jobs, the need for a quality education is critical.

### Policy Analysis Question #4: *How are certain words, statistics and other numerical data used to convince, persuade people, or affect people’s emotions?*

The campaign slogan in favor of Question #2 in Massachusetts was “English for the Children.” The campaign was effective at convincing the general public that bilingual education programs were not teaching students English. My students found that this was not true, but they asked, “Who could say no to teaching children English?” In addition, because a similar English-immersion law had passed in 1998 in California, standardized test scores and other statistics from researchers in California were used to persuade Massachusetts voters that English-immersion classes were improving the academic achievements of California’s bilingual students. Opponents of English-immersion bilingual education also highlighted test scores and other school data to show that California’s bilingual students were not proficient in English after being immersed in English-only classes for an academic year. My students and I discussed how the same statistics can be manipulated by politicians and public policy advocates to support different sides of an issue and to further their own interests.

### Conclusion

Through analyzing an important public policy in this way, my students gained a sense of their personal and collective power. Some students who had supported English-only classes changed their minds once they studied the issue more deeply and explored the underlying assumptions of English-only ideology. Other students were eager to actively participate in shaping public policies that improve people’s lives.

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## What Is English Only?

by Lenore Balliro and Andrea Nash

There is a movement in the United States called “English Only.” The people participating in the “English Only” movement want to make English the official language of the United States. “English Only” laws have been passed in 16 states. And, for the first time in the nation’s history, an English Language Amendment to the Constitution has been proposed. There is an organization called U.S. English that raises a lot of money to support “English Only” work.

Many people who support “English Only” think there are too many immigrants in this country who do not want to learn English. They would like to pay less tax money to help immigrants. They don’t like to pay for bilingual services and bilingual education. They believe that bilingual services discourage immigrants from learning English. They believe that the use of different languages divides the United States and that “English Only” laws can help unite the country.

### “English Only” laws would put in danger:

- bilingual assistance in voting and bilingual ballots
- bilingual translations in the courts
- interpreter services in emergency services like hot lines and emergency rooms, in state agencies and elsewhere
- bilingual education
- multilingual social services
- multilingual employment training
- multilingual drivers’ license exams
- multilingual medical services like pregnancy counselling and AIDS prevention education

## ENGLISH ONLY ACTIVITIES

### Think About It

1. Make a list of the people you know who speak two or more languages very well. Tell what languages they know, how they learned them, and why they learned them.
2. Do you know people who no longer speak their original language? Why did they give up their first language? Do you think it was a wise decision?
3. Do you agree with some people who believe our country would be better off if more people were bilingual? Why? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Do you think it is important for people to learn the main language of the country in which they live? Why?
5. Do you think it is important also to keep a first language? Why?

### What Do You Think? (Yes/No/Don’t Know)

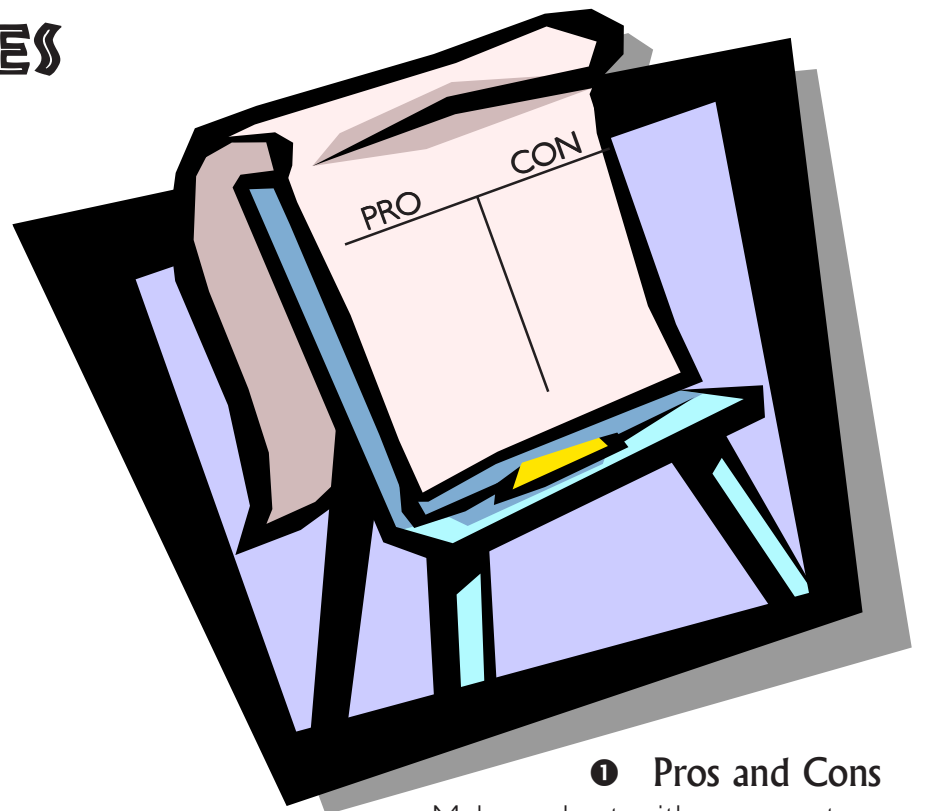
Read the first two sentences of “What is English Only?” to the class. If most students know something about “English Only,” have students do this “quiz” in pairs as a pre-reading. Then have them generate their own questions about “English Only.” Then have them read the text “What is English Only?” in small groups and do the “quiz” again.

If most students don’t know anything about “English Only,” have them generate their own questions about “English Only.” Then have them read the text in small groups and take the quiz.

All students, after taking the quiz, should then discuss the answers and identify which items are fact and which are opinion. Make a list of the questions that remain about “English Only.” This can become a research project that involves reading more literature, having a speaker, holding a debate, etc.

**Note:** You may want to spend some time on discussing the difference between fact and opinion, as well as on ways to support an opinion or position.

- \_\_\_\_\_ English is the official language of the United States.
- \_\_\_\_\_ “English Only” laws would prohibit bilingual signs every where.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Bilingual education discourages learning English.
- \_\_\_\_\_ “English Only” advocates want our taxes to pay for ESL programs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ “English Only” laws prohibit bilingual ballots for voting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ An official language would unify the United States.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Immigrants want to learn English.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Immigrants benefit from “English Only” laws.



### 1 Pros and Cons

Make a chart with reasons to support the “English Only” movement (pro) and reasons not to support it (con). You can use the ideas from the article and also add your own.

### 2 How Would “English Only” Affect You?

Places I speak English	Places I use bilingual services	If there were no bilingual services, I would . . .

### Suggested Activities

- 1) Have students help each other complete the first two columns of this chart.
- 2) Review the use of the conditional form “would.”
- 3) Have students generate “would” statements in the 3rd column.
- 4) Discuss the various strategies students have listed for coping with the loss of services. What would they do? Who would they rely on? Etc.

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# School and Home

by Lenore Balliro and Andrea Nash



## Discussion Questions

- Who are they?
- Where are they?
- Does she understand the paper?
- How does she feel? Why?
- Should she sign the paper? Why?
- What happens if she signs it?
- What should she do?
- Do you get notices from your child's school? Do you get notices from other places in English?
- Are they always in English?
- What do you do?
- Should the notices be in other languages?

## Elena

by Pat Mora

My Spanish isn't enough. I remember how I'd smile listening to my little ones, understanding every word they'd say, their jokes, their songs, their plots.

*Vamos a pedirle dulces a mamá. Vamos.*

But that was in Mexico. Now my children go to American high schools. They speak English. At night they sit around the kitchen table, laugh with one another. I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone. I bought a book to learn English. My husband frowned, drank more beer. My oldest said, "Mamá, he doesn't want you to be smarter than he is." I'm forty, embarrassed at mispronouncing words, embarrassed at the laughter of my children, the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take my English book and lock myself in the bathroom, say the thick words softly, for if I stop trying, I will be deaf when my children need my help.

From *Making Face, Making Soul*. Copyright © 1990 by Gloria Anzaldúa. Published by Aunt Lute Books. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

- Compare the picture to the right to the one above? What is different?
- Does she understand the paper?
- How does she feel? Why?
- What should she do?
- What is the difference between the first situation and the second one? What could happen to the child if she signed the paper?

### FOLLOW UP

Have students role play follow up situations from both scenarios. (Example, for the lower picture, have the mother call the school or visit the school to complain, etc.)



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# White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation

by June Jordan

**W**hite power uses white English as a calculated, political display of power to control and eliminate the powerless. In America, that power belongs to white power. School, compulsory public school education, is the process whereby Black children first encounter the punishing force of this white power. 'First grade' equals first contact with the politics of white language, and its incalculably destructive consequences for Black lives. This is what I mean, exactly: both Black and white youngsters are compelled to attend school. Once inside this system, the white child is rewarded for mastery of his standard, white English: the language he learned at his mother's white and standard knee. But the Black child is punished for mastery of his non-standard, Black English; for the ruling elite of America have decided that non-standard is *sub-standard*, and even dangerous, and must be eradicated.

Moreover, the white child receives formal instruction in his standard English, and endless opportunities for the exercise and creative display of his language. But where is the elementary school course in Afro-American language, and where are the opportunities for the *accredited* exercise, and creative exploration, of Black language?

The two languages are not interchangeable. They cannot, nor do they attempt to communicate equal or identical thoughts, or feelings. And, since the experience to be conveyed is quite different, Black from white, these lingual dissimilarities should not surprise or worry anyone. However, they are both communication systems with regularities, exceptions, and values governing their word designs. Both are equally liable to poor, good, better, and creative use. In short, they are both

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***This, I submit, is a fundamental, nationwide experience of Black life up against white English used to destroy us: literally accept the terms of the oppressor, or perish: that is the irreducible, horrifying truth of the politics of language.***

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accessible to critical criteria such as clarity, force, message, tone, and imagination. Besides this, standard English is comprehensible to Black children, even as Black language is comprehensible to white teachers—supposing that the teachers are willing to make half the effort they demand of Black students.

Then what is the difficulty? The problem is that we are saying *language*, but really dealing with power. The word 'standard' is just not the same as the word 'technical' or 'rural' or 'straight.' *Standard* means the rule, the norm. Anyone deviating from the standard is therefore 'wrong.' As a result, literally millions of Black children are 'wrong' from the moment they begin to absorb and imitate the language of their Black lives. Is that an acceptable idea?

As things stand, childhood fluency in Afro-American language leads to reading problems that worsen, course failure in diverse subjects dependent on reading skills, and a thoroughly wounded self-esteem. Afterward, an abject school career is eclipsed by an abject life career. 'Failing' white English leads straight to a 'failure' of adult life. This, I submit, is a fundamental, nationwide experience of Black life up against white English used to destroy us: literally accept the terms of the oppressor, or perish: that is the irreducible, horrifying truth of the politics of language.

Well, number one, we grownups: we, the Black mothers and Black fathers, and Black teachers, and Black writers, and grown Blackfolk, in general: we do not have to let this damnable situation continue; we must make it stop. We cannot accept the terms, the language of our enemy and expect to win anything; we cannot accept the coercion of our children into failure and expect to survive, as a people. The legitimacy of our language must be fully acknowledged by all of us. That will mean insisting that white/standard English be presented simply as the Second Language. That will mean presenting the second language, obviously, with perpetual reference to the first language, and the cul-

ture the first language bespeaks.

Sincere recognition of Black language as legitimate will mean formal instruction and encouragement in its use, within the regular curriculum. It will mean the respectful approaching of Black children, *in the language of Black children*. Yes: it's true that we need to acquire competence in the language of the currently powerful: Black children in America must acquire competence in white English, for the sake of self-preservation: **BUT YOU WILL NEVER TEACH A CHILD A NEW LANGUAGE BY SCORNING AND RIDICULING AND FORCIBLY ERASING HIS FIRST LANGUAGE.**

We can and we ought to join together to protect our Black children, our Black language, our terms of our reality, and our defining of the future we dream and desire. The public school is one, ready-made battleground. But the war is all around us and the outcome depends on how we understand or fail to perceive the serious, political intention to homogenize us, Blackfolks, out of existence. In our daily, business phone calls, in our 'formal' correspondence with whites, in what we publish let us dedicate ourselves to the revelation of our true selves, on our given terms, and demand respect for us, as we are. Let us study and use our Black language, more and more: it is not A Mistake, or A Verbal Deficiency. It is a communication system subsuming dialect/regional variations that leave intact, nevertheless, a language that is invariable in profound respects. For example:

- A. Black language practices minimal inflection of verb forms. (E.g.: *I go, we go, he go, and I be, you be*, etc.) This is *non-standard* and, also, an obviously more logical use of verbs. It is also evidence of a value system that considers the person—the actor—more important than the action.
- B. Consistency of syntax:  
You going to the store. (Depending on tone, can be a question.)  
You going to the store. (Depending: can be a command.)  
You going to the store. (Depending: can be a simple, declarative state ment.)
- C. Infrequent, irregular use of the possessive case.
- D. Clear, logical use of multiple negatives within a single sentence, to express an unmistakably negative idea. E.g., *You ain gone bother me no way no more, you hear?*
- E. Other logical consistencies, such as: *ours, his, theirs*, and, therefore, *mines*.

Our Black language is a political fact suffering from political persecution and political malice. Let us understand this and meet the man, politically; let us meet the man *talking the way we talk*; let us not fail to seize this means to our survival, despite white English and its power. Let us condemn white English for what it is: a threat to mental health, integrity of person, and persistence as a people of our own choosing.

And, as for our children: let us make sure that the whole world will welcome and applaud and promote the words they bring into our reality; in the struggle to reach each other, there can be no right or wrong words for our longing and our needs; there can only be the names that we trust and we try.

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# When I Go Home I'm Going To Talk Indian

by Carol M. Hodgson

My best friend, Rose, was the most fun in the world. I looked forward each day to meeting her in the school hallway just before the bell rang. She often wore a barely-suppressed grin, or covered her mouth with her hand. I would spend recess trying to get her tell me what the joke was. Usually, she had managed undetected to plant a stone on Sister's chair or sneak an extra crust of bread from the supper hall. Rose, head bobbing, dark eyes twinkling, would finally share her secret transgression with me, causing us both to burst into uncontrollable giggles, and occasionally drawing the attention of a stony-faced nun who, disturbed by our laughter, would shoo us to move on.

The Catholic Mission loomed at the far end of the only road cutting through Fort Providence, Northwest Territories. In 1954, I entered my first year of school there as the only "white kid." My father spent his days predicting weather and tapping it in Morse Code, down to a military base in Hay River. My mother cooked, knitted, sewed my clothes and preserved berries. I, being a spirited five-year-old, knew that we lived in an exciting place, accessible only by barge or float plane and snowed under nine months of the year.



Painting by David K. John. © Sonja Keohane.

The Mission school was the place for me to go to and hang out with other children. I didn't question the locked iron doors, the bars on the windows, the unreasonable rules imposed by the nuns. I didn't find it unusual that my playmates were several hundred native children who lived at the school rather than with their families. It was my only experience of school and I had no need to question.

The day I arrived at school and didn't see Rose, I thought she must be ill. The recess bell finally rang and, in the impish manner I had learned from my friend, I quietly slid down the forbidding corridors that led to the dormitory. The nun who was changing the beds glared at me as though I wasn't meant to exist. I lowered my eyes to my shoes, knowing the necessary rules to avoid having to stand in the corner or get the strap.

"What are you doing here?" she barked.

I heard the squeak of her black boots, the jangle of her crucifix and the angry swish of her robes as she came closer.

"Looking for Rose, Sister. I thought she was sick." "She's not here. Now get back to class!"

I scurried back to the coatroom and pulled on my parka and touque.

She must be outside, I thought, struggling to push open the heavy back door.

Children filled the snowy yard, screaming, laughing, building snow forts and pulling each other around on little pieces of cardboard. It was freezing today and the nuns gathered close to the building, warming their hands over the fire barrel. I stood on the high stone steps, searching everywhere for Rose's red jacket. Finally I spotted her in the farthest corner, standing with her face to the fence, no friends around.

"Rose!"

I shouted as loudly as I could, running down the steps and slogging through the deepest part of the snow where the other children had not gone. When I reached her, I tugged on her sleeve.

"Come on, Rose! Recess is almost over!"

She kept her back to me, warming her hands under her jacket. Impatiently, I tugged again, sure that the bell would ring at any moment and we would have no time to play.

Now she turned, her face drawn with pain and fury. She held up her red, swollen hands and I knew then that she hadn't been warming them, but holding, protecting them as best she could, from the searing pain. I saw the tears, which had frozen on her beautiful cheeks.

"When I go home I'm going to talk In-

dian!", she whispered fiercely.

The bell rang and neither one of us moved. Cold needled into our faces and I stood, watching Rose breathe rapid frosty puffs into the bleak northern air. I didn't know what to do for my friend. When I looked back, I saw the other children were almost all inside.

"Rose, we have to go."

She nodded, wiping her face in her sleeve. We couldn't hold hands like we usually did. Instead, I touched her shoulder as we walked toward the stone steps, where two nuns stood like sentries, waiting for us.

Rose and I never talked about what had happened to her. We still sat together every day and traded the ribbons in our hair. We built forts and pulled each other around in the snow on pieces of cardboard. Rose talked longingly of eating her granny's toasted bannock and romping in the woods with her younger sisters, who hadn't yet arrived at the Mission school.

Our family left Fort Providence two years later. In the time I knew her, Rose never did get to go home.

## Author's Note:

Rose was strapped for speaking her language. This was a common practice in schools all over the place at the time. Her open hands were hit with a large thick leather strap many times. I received the strap on several occasions, although not as harshly as Rose did in my story. I did see many native children whose hands were strapped so long and hard that they were blistered for days, as though they had been burned with fire.

Carol M. Hodgson is a British Columbia writer whose work has appeared most recently in The Cup of Comfort Cookbook. With her business 'Recollections', Carol assists people to tell their family stories. She is also part-owner of the Sunshine Coast School of Writing. She can be reached by email at: c\_hodgson@sunshine.net.

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## The Reservation Boarding School System in the U.S.

Between 1870-1928, the United States government imposed a system of forced assimilation on Native peoples of this country. After the Civil War, attention turned to what came to be called the "Indian Problem"—a widespread belief that unless Native Americans were "civilized" to be more like white people, they could never be productive members of society.

Schooling was seen as the best way of acculturating Native American youth to "American" ways of thinking and living. Indeed, some "friends" of the Native Americans advocated this system of education on behalf of Native people believing that wiping out their cultural traditions was the only way they would eventually be full citizens in this new "American" society. Many felt the intention to "kill the Indian, save the man" was a just and even favorable attitude.

At first, day schools were located near children's homes, but after a relatively short time, these schools were declared unsuccessful. Children, who still lived with their families, had too much contact with their native ways to be successfully indoctrinated with white society's language and values.

Next, reservation boarding schools located near the Bureau of Indian Affairs agency headquarters were established. Children attending these schools were only permitted to go home during the summer months and perhaps for a short period at Christmas time. Even with the children removed from the daily influence of home and family, the assimilation process was not proceeding at an acceptable pace as far as the government was

continued on page 17



# Voices Against Injustice

by Chris Browder

## Colombian Labor Organizers Speak Out in English

Imagine if you were the victim of some injustice but had no way to communicate your stories to people who could help you fight back. What would you do? How would you feel?

I currently teach English to such a group of students in the hope of enabling them in their struggle for justice. I work as a contractor for the National Labor College in a special program established with funding and direction from the Solidarity Center (part of the AFL-CIO), and the department of Labor. Labor organizers from Colombia have been sponsored to come to the United States to study and do internships with

***It is critically important that [the labor organizers] speak about their experiences in their own voice. When people hear of the situation straight from one of the victims, it has a profound effect—the suffering of the world is knocking on their door and speaking their language.***

labor unions here in the U.S. The particular students who have come have been chosen because of the danger they would be in had they stayed in Colombia. All of our students have received death threats or have escaped attempts on their lives. In the words of Brian Finnegan from the Solidarity Center, “Like many human rights leaders, they are threatened in order to silence them.” Threats are taken very seriously because they are generally carried out and little protection is available. 116 trade unionists had already been killed by August 2002 when the new president took office. 185 were killed in 2001 and the killings have increased sharply since then (ICFTU, 2002). The killings are the fruit of a fairly organized effort by right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia to eradicate unions, but other groups (e.g. guerillas and drug warlords) have also killed many unionists. The trade unionists get very little protection or sympathy from their government. These paramilitary groups often act with total impunity. Murderers are almost never arrested or tried. Even more shocking is that members of these paramilitary groups are often employed by companies as security forces and often have great access to union organizers who may work at the company. Amnesty International charges that some of the companies implicated in these murders are creating products for export to the United States and some are branches of, or affiliates of, multinational corporations. Most people in the United States are not aware of these human rights abuses and will likely not know about it until the commercial media decides it is newsworthy.

While teaching the Colombian labor organizers to speak English, I am effectively enabling them to directly speak to people of my country about their situation—a situation that people in the U.S. probably would not hear about otherwise. When my students attend conferences, meetings, and demonstrations they have translators, but it is critically important that they speak about their experiences in their own voice. So, besides general English, I am teaching my students how to tell people about their struggle. Whenever we go out, they start conversations with the people they meet and then tell them about the situation in Colombia. For example, one of my students met some election workers campaigning for their candidates on the sidewalk outside the college. When they asked her if she had come to the U.S. just to study, she told them that she had to leave her homeland because a paramilitary group wanted to kill her. Somewhat shocked, they asked her why. She responded by telling them that because she and her union were resisting the privatization of the public sector mandated by the International Monetary Fund they had made some dangerous enemies. Then, she told them that U.S. military aid supports the paramilitary forces that wanted her dead. When people hear of the situation straight from one of the victims, it has a profound effect—the suffering of the world is knocking on their door and speaking their language. It also has a profound effect on the students. And, for me, it makes my job seem worthwhile. Although my students already have voices of their own, it is important that they can use their voice in English and thereby reach more of us.

*Chris Browder has been teaching ESOL for ten years and has taught in many countries. The Colombian Trade Unionist Training Project has received no more funding from the Justice Department and so it has not sponsored any more unionists. Chris now works in the Maryland public schools.*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

To read testimonies of the students in this article:

[www.geocities.com/colombian\\_unions](http://www.geocities.com/colombian_unions)

**International Confederation of Free Trade Unions:**

[www.icftu.org](http://www.icftu.org)

For background information do general search for “Colombia”

For specific info on recent trade union issues search for “Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights”

**Amnesty International**

[web.amnesty.org](http://web.amnesty.org)

Search for “Annual report Colombia”

**United for A Fair Economy** (To find out more about the International

Monetary Fund)

[www.faireconomy.org](http://www.faireconomy.org)

Search for “IMF”

## Reservation Schools continued from page 16

concerned. Parents often came to visit their children, thus allowing them the opportunity to speak their language and stay in contact with their customs. This was distinctly counterproductive in the eyes of the assimilationists.

The third and final plan to be adopted was the off-reservation boarding school. The children were sent, in many cases, hundreds of miles away from family, language, and Native ways. What started as an experiment with Native American prisoners, soon became the model upon which this latest educational effort was patterned.

Where available, documentation consistently shows that, at best, only half the “school” day was spent in academic instruction. The rest of the time was spent in religious indoctrination (which was regarded as the primary “academic” task by school officials) and hard labor (which in various ways was used to offset the costs of school operation). Upon arrival, children were stripped of their clothing, had their hair cut short and were assigned new “pronounceable” names. They were forbidden to speak their native languages, or practice any of their customs. Children caught disobeying might have their mouths washed out with soap or might suffer a more severe penalty like being whipped with a switch.

By the mid-1920s support for the reservation school system began to

wane and opposition began to rise. People started to see the separation of children from their families as cruel and were not pleased with the social and educational outcomes. In 1928, a definitive study on the state of Indian education, commonly known as the Meriam report, was published. It called on the government to abandon its emphasis on assimilation and replace it with a child-centered educational approach. Shortly after the report’s release, the Hoover administration nearly doubled the amount of money being spent on Indian schools. Most of this money was spent on improving school buildings as well as improving the diet and medical attention received by the children. That administration also placed greater emphasis in on-reservation education, and nearly all of the off-reservation schools were closed by 1933. Many regard the reservation boarding school system of education as a form of genocide that has had severe consequences on Native Americans in the United States. The reservation school system perpetrated cruelty, oppression, and lasting trauma that haunts us all still today.

Adapted from “The Reservation Boarding School System in the United States, 1870-1928.” © Sonja Keohane. Adapted by permission of the author. Original article available at [www.twofrog.com](http://www.twofrog.com).

# Chante Pwen: Exploring Languages of Resistance

by Erik Jacobson

Many students in ESOL classes have come from countries where there was a great deal of political violence, often perpetrated by the state. In such situations, the urge to express oneself freely and openly is in conflict with the desire for self-preservation. To speak out directly is to put one's self at risk. For this reason, those who would resist the authorities must find creative ways to get their messages out. In some cases it is by creating underground publishing networks (such as the samizdat press in former Eastern Block countries), while in other cases people play with language itself and use symbols and allusions to hide resistance in plain sight. An examination of how these languages of resistance are produced is a perfect topic to investigate in an ESOL (or other) class. Such an examination provides a chance to mix discussions of political and cultural history with detailed analyses of the linguistic features of politically charged language.

In a class I currently teach in which all of the students are from Haiti, we explored chante pwen, which are a Haitian tradition. The anthropologist Jennie Smith explains that chante pwen are songs that use "symbolism to chastise, mock, or comment critically on the deeds or character of a person or group of people. Ordinarily, the symbols employed must be transparent enough to ensure that the message gets across but ambiguous enough

## A Classic Chante Pwen

*Meriken kenbe n nan kou o  
Tonton Sam bay nou kle kou o  
Paske nou se pitit, yo pran n pou pitimi  
Nou sèman 7 fwa nou pap viv kou zombi  
Yo touye kochon djol long n yo  
Yo ba n kochon grimèl o  
Yo fòse n vann tout ti poul nou  
Yo ba n pye poul pou vann  
Sak fè sa?  
Tonton Sam o!*

to protect the singer from becoming a target of retaliation" (Smith, 48). These chante pwen can be sung while working in groups, or by individuals going through their daily routines. Subjects range from neighbors who engage in greedy behaviors to important political figures.

Since I knew that the class would get heated, I wanted to make sure that students' academic needs would not be lost in an energetic discussion. To do this, the project followed a three-step process.

First, I had students explain to me the concept of a chante pwen in their own words. This included a discussion of some of the unwritten rules about singing a chante pwen. For example, how do you keep a message clear but ambiguous enough to provide plausible deniability? Students suggested that you never mention anyone by name. For example, unhappy students could sing about "the teacher who is always late," and be able to tell their own teacher "it is not about you, it is about the teacher (who is always late)." My students also noted that other ways of keeping the song ambiguous is to create nicknames or to use animal imagery. As a summary of the discussion, they wrote the following explanation.

"A chante pwen is a song about an enemy. Chante pwen are indirect. You don't use people's names because if you do use names it is dangerous. When they know you are talking about them, they can sue you, beat you or kill you. You have to be careful when singing a chante pwen. People without power sing chante pwen to say or remember something bad about people with power. They have no weapons except chante pwen."

The second part of the project was to read over a classic chante pwen and discuss the meaning and value of the song. I provided a bilingual version of the chante pwen, and had students read over the translation. I chose a song about a low point in Haitian-U.S. relations from Smith's book (see inset).

We began by covering any questions the students had about vocabulary (e.g., solemnly swear), and reviewed some of the verb tenses we had been working on in class (e.g., present progressive—*is strangling*). After this, the class moved on to a discussion of the ideas presented. The song refers to a international development policy enacted by the United States in the late 1970s, in which the hearty indigenous Haitian pigs were replaced with pigs from the United States. These US born pigs didn't eat local food, so farmers were forced to buy feed from the United States.

Even with the expensive imported feed, most of the pigs died, and the economic consequences were severe. The fact that this plan could only have been carried out with the help of the Haitian government was not lost on my students. While the Haitian government is not named in the chante pwen, it is understood that it, too, is responsible for the resulting disaster. My students wrote the following summary:

"The Haitian government said to kill all the Haitian pigs because they are sick. Then they gave the Haitian people white pigs. The white pigs died. The Haitian pigs ate everything, but the white pigs had a complex diet. This was a bad thing, because before when a family wants to send a child to school they sold the Haitian pig. It was a good investment for the family."

For the third and final part of the project I had the class create a new chante pwen that addressed a topic they were concerned about. For some time we had been discussing the situation of Haitian refugees in Miami who are being held in jail while awaiting their asylum hearings. This policy of detention is not applied to other potential refugees, who are allowed to live in the community until the time of their hearing. My students feel this is the result of anti-Haitian prejudice, and that since the Bush administra-

**The Americans have us by the throat, Ohh  
Uncle Sam is strangling us, Ohhh  
Because we're small, they take us for nothin'  
But we solemnly swear we won't live like zombies!  
They killed our Creole pigs  
And gave us their old white pigs  
They force us to get rid of our little chickens  
And then hand us chickens to sell  
Who's doing this to us?  
Uncle Sam, Ohhh**

tion shares this prejudice, that nothing is happening to change the situation.

Students began by writing the first line of the song, making sure to find the proper balance of ambiguity and clarity. This occasioned a student initiated discussion of the various pronouns that they could use. My students then came up with a melody to match the lyrics. With that melody in hand, they proceeded to write three more lines. One student modeled the singing of each line as they went along, and then led the whole class in singing the chante pwen when it was completed. It was short but to the point.

Someone is keeping us in jail  
The son doesn't care about us  
The son is just like his father  
We want justice for Haitians in Miami

While it is perfectly clear which son and father the singers have in mind, there is no proof of it being a given father and son pair. With that plausible deniability in place, the students agreed to let me send the song lyrics via email to the White House, to the INS, and to groups who are working on Haitian rights. We haven't yet received a reply from the White House or the INS.

In creating this chante pwen, students had an opportunity to consider what they learned about the language of resistance in their native country, and how it might apply it to their life in the United States. Not surprisingly, my students expressed a belief that they can not always freely state their opinions, because their status as immigrants from Haiti makes them vulnerable to reaction on the part of the U.S. government. Despite living in the land of the free, they still see a need for chante pwen.

## Reference:

*When the Hands are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti.* Smith, Jennie. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 2001.

*Erik Jacobson teaches ESOL at the Haitian American Public Health Initiative in Mattapan, MA. He is co-author of "Creating Authentic Materials for the Adult Literacy Classroom," forthcoming from NCSALL at World Education.*



# Dorothy and Earl

by Hal Adams

For 12 years I've been teaching adult writing workshops in poor neighborhoods in Chicago and putting out a magazine of their writing for distribution in the neighborhoods and schools where the workshops meet. In those 12 years I have seen the relationship between language and power play itself out in many different ways. Sometimes the relationship was clear, material and specific. For instance, members of one writing workshop got the city to tear down a dangerous abandoned building near the school their kids attended. Another workshop group banded together with their neighbors to pressure the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) to build good replacement housing when their public high-rises were demolished. Today, members of a parents' writing workshop in a school in a Mexican immigrant neighborhood are helping to plan a community center and persuading the city to be sensitive to the gentrification implications of a planned upgrade of the commuter train line that passes through their neighborhood. These examples seem to me to demonstrate how participation in a self-conscious linguistic activity, a writing workshop in this case, can inspire people as a community to take control over an aspect of their lives.

Other times the relationship between language and power in the writing workshops is more personal and less tangible, but no less significant. I think of individuals whose lives were changed by the writing experience and whose writing changed the people who read their work. Take Dorothy Clark, for instance.

Four years after Dorothy began writing, two years after her first writing workshop ended, I asked Dorothy and her twelve-year-old son Earl to talk about their memories of her early writing days. We went for lunch at a fast-food restaurant. As always, Dorothy was shy. She appeared uncomfortable even when Earl and I looked to her in gentlemanly fashion to order first from the menu. To remove even this faint spotlight of attention from her she ordered the first thing to catch her eye, the Italian Beef House Special. This episode reminded me of Dorothy's shyness in the writing group. It was weeks after joining the group before Dorothy spoke or wrote, and when the magazine came out she refused to have her picture taken for it. Her reluctance to participate eventually irritated the group so much that Florence, a member who had overcome her own fear of writing, confronted Dorothy about it. "Everybody was scared at first," she said, "but we got over it. It's time you do too and be a real part of this group." Dorothy's shyness remains to this day, but after Florence's admonition, she began to write and speak in the group, and she allowed her picture to be put in the magazine.

Earl, unlike his mother, is not shy. He rejected the house specialty, and went instead for the pizza puff. That he'd never had a pizza puff did not deter him. His approach at lunch, as it was elsewhere, was straight ahead. One day when he was in second grade, soon after the group had published its first issue of the magazine, in which his mother had several pieces, Earl came running into the parents' writing workshop and announced, "I need enough copies of the magazine for my whole class! My teacher wants me to read Mom's articles to them." He dashed off with 27 copies.

The teacher later told me the children took turns reading out loud to the class from the magazine. It was the pieces about the adults' earlier days, she said, that particularly attracted the students. My report from Earl at lunch confirmed his teacher's observation. "I learned things about my mom I didn't know before, like when she first came to Chicago."

*I moved in the CHA in 1972. I was around twenty at the time. I had two daughters and my niece. A little later I took in my other niece. I was new to Chicago, didn't know anything about the projects or welfare. I was introduced to both of them. When I first moved in everything was nice. I paid low rent, according to my income. I didn't have gas or light bills, but there was plenty of heat and light. I had two bedrooms.*

*I didn't let my girls go outside because I was over-protective of my babies. When you saw them, you saw me. The neighbors always referred to me as "the lady with the four girls." It was peaceful at first because there were lots of older people staying there.*

*I was always told that the people at the other end [of the project development] were bad, very bad. I was afraid to go down there. But, I stayed in the projects fourteen years, until I got married. My husband said he would not go into my building. But other people*

*from outside visited me a lot. We laughed and talked, we cooked, they spent the night. But before I left with my husband, it started to get bad. They started to shoot. Almost every day loud noise started in the hallway.*

**"The Way It Used to Be"** by Dorothy Clark

Earl was born several years later to Dorothy and the new husband she refers to in the piece. It is clear that Earl was not aware of the factors surrounding Dorothy's move to Chicago when she was young, alone and responsible for several small children.

I asked Earl to tell me more about what he thought back in second grade of his mother's writing. Between bites of his deep-fried delight, he said, "I wondered what she was doing at first. I was surprised when I saw her articles in the magazine. I didn't think she had the *courage* to do that. She's shy and doesn't like attention. I remember she wrote about how she felt when my father died." Earl added, "Sometime I'd like to write about how I felt when my father died."

*Today was not a good day for me. It was my anniversary, but I lost my husband about three months ago. I was thinking about being a widow at 43 and having a seven-year-old son. Sometimes it seems like life is unfair, but I know better. I can't really write about how I feel inside. It is hard for me because sometimes people don't want to hear about your problems. People can be cruel. So sometimes you keep things bottled up inside.*

**"Thinking"** by Dorothy Clark

The courage Earl saw in his mother was there all along, as her move to Chicago in 1972 shows. But when she wrote, Earl, even as a second grader, saw her in a different light. He always had been aware of her love for him and of the stabilizing force she was in the family, but here was a new, fuller aspect of her character. The group members saw it too. Florence, who had urged Dorothy earlier to be more active in the group, refers to her now with fondness as a "monster," by which she means that Dorothy freely expresses her opinions.

Dorothy probably always had strong opinions about political structures, but her reluctance to speak out made it impossible to say what those opinions were. As she began to write more often her perspectives became apparent.

*My point of view about what's going on in Henry Horner [a large public housing complex in Chicago] is that they want all poor people out of the community, point blank. If the people don't move out, then the authorities are going to come up with all kinds of things, legal and illegal, to do it. They promised some people they could stay, but in the long run they will back off that agreement. From the beginning they were not going to stand by what they said. Do you really think they are fixing all this up for the black people? Get real. My son's school is changing. They have a beautiful park in front now, and other work's being done inside and out . . . I am saying they are not doing it for the people in the neighborhood. We all want some place nice to stay, a safe place for our children. They say the people in the projects don't want anything nice, but to me that is a lie.*

*Some people have a better chance in life than others.*

**"Better Chances"** by Dorothy Clark

It's not only the obvious and material outcomes of literate activity that demonstrate its power. Writing changed Dorothy's way of relating to the world; she made more of herself available to the public, as can be seen even by the small sample of her writing presented in this story. Writing also raised Dorothy's confidence in herself as a thinker, as indicated by the dramatic increase in her participation in the several writing workshops she has attended over the years. Her writing production has increased; she has become more willing to seek counsel from the workshop members; the workshop members have shown an inclination to use her writing to help them develop new ideas for writing and discussion. She has become a critical member of these social microcosms we call writing workshops. In the process, Dorothy has changed herself and has become more effective in helping to bring about change within the group and in her community.

Hal Adams is the editor of the community writing magazine, *Real Conditions*, and is affiliated with the University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Education.

# Questions: A Powerful Tool for Self-Advocacy

by Pat Nelson

In a district courtroom, surrounded by the trappings of power and authority, a judge is deciding one of many child custody and support cases on his docket for that day. He makes a quick ruling that the child's mother believes is not in her family's best interests and stands to leave the bench. She stands up and tells him, "Sit back down, we need to talk." Surprised, the judge agrees to listen. The mother knows she has only 15 minutes to make her case. But she has prepared herself. She has a list of priorities that she calmly presents, articulating her reasons for wanting supervised visits and child support, staying focused on one or two issues critical to her argument. The judge changes his ruling.

At a local TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) office, a young client explains to a caseworker that her benefits were wrongly denied. She has a notebook full of prioritized questions and, should she need it, the name of the supervisor in the office. She takes notes on what the caseworker tells her, and then asks the person to review and sign the notes. Impressed and perhaps a bit intimidated, the caseworker begins to help the client to figure out what they both need to do to resolve the problem.

Examples such as these demonstrate the power of *The Right Question Project's* educational strategy that builds people's capacity to advocate for themselves, navigate complex systems, and hold decision-makers accountable.

Many low- and moderate-income people come into daily contact with public agencies and institutions that routinely make or implement decisions that can have a profound effect on their lives. They usually spend a lot of time answering questions, but don't ask many because they often don't know what or how to ask.

When people don't have strategies to help themselves, they often depend on advocates or staff from social service agencies to help them deal with a maze of services, institutions and bureaucracies. This can create a sense of powerlessness, disengagement and even passivity among people. Yet, our democracy depends on people having the tools to participate in and shape the decisions that affect their lives from dealing with public agencies and institutions, to being part of neighborhood organizations, to voting and other activities.

*The Right Question Project's* educational strategy helps people make a shift to greater participation by helping people focus clearly on decisions, how they are made, the basis for making them, and the person's opportunities for having a say in them. Learning about decisions awakens in learners a whole new world of possibilities. They become more effective in their personal decision-making; they are able to use the information they uncover while going through the process to determine the fairness and legitimacy of decisions made about them and to hold decision-makers accountable.

The words of someone who learned and used the Focus on Decisions expresses the transformative effects of *The Right Question Project's* educational strategy: "Now when I go to meetings where people are making decisions that affect my family, I don't have to just sit there. . . . I think about what I want to know and what I need to know and then I ask questions. What a difference."

For more information about *The Right Question Project* and its work, go to [www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org) or call (617) 492-1900.

## The Question Formulation Technique

The essence of the RQP educational strategy has two major components: *Developing the Skill of Question Formulation* and a *Framework for Focusing on Decisions*. The *Question Formulation Technique* is a simple step-by-step process that teaches learners how to formulate their own questions. "Formulating" rather than "asking" questions is stressed because formulating questions requires people to think carefully about what they need to know, what they want to know, and why they want to know it. The process begins by having learners select an issue that is of concern to them, then they begin the four structured steps of the technique:

1. **Brainstorming:** In this first step, participants think of as many questions as they can about the issue. By brainstorming questions, rather than ideas, they start to come up with questions without stopping to analyze, explain or answer them. This step allows participants to get more comfortable with the formulation of questions, to get beyond the initial emotionally loaded questions, and to hear different perspectives without entering into a discussion. Participants who may be comfortable with brainstorming are often challenged by the task of brainstorming questions. That is why this part adheres to posing only questions. All the questions are recorded exactly as formulated validating the learner's input and instilling a new confidence in their ability to participate. The recorder can be a volunteer participant or the facilitator of the exercise. Once brainstorming is completed they learn how to distinguish between closed and open-ended questions, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each and which to use depending on the kind of information they are seeking.
2. **Prioritizing:** Participants are asked to prioritize their questions and, by analyzing them, to select the top three that they want to pursue further. They then choose one of those three to focus on. This step provides an opportunity for discussion and assessment of the different issues that have surfaced. It requires give and take between the members of the group.
3. **Branching-off:** Once participants choose the one question they want to focus on, they are asked to branch off that question and brainstorm more questions about it. This process will help them discover how to ask more questions to help them get closer to the answers they need. They will also discover new questions they will want answered. Those who had difficulty brainstorming questions in the beginning will feel more comfortable now.
4. **Prioritize again:** Finally participants prioritize again from the last list of questions they generated and choose the three they want to get answered first. Now they are ready to work together to design their own action plan for getting their questions answered. Going through the steps sequentially engages people in a critical thinking process that deepens their ability to think independently and enables them to discover new layers of complexity and understanding of the issues that they are concerned about.

**The Focus on Decisions** helps learners use their question formulation skills to probe a particular decision and decide on what actions they need to take by focusing on:

1. **The process used to make a decision:** Questions are used to help learners uncover the steps used in making a decision; the who, when, where and how.
2. **The basis used to make the decision:** Here learners focus on discovering the rules, regulations and policies that the decision is based on to determine if the decision is legitimate.
3. **The opportunities to participate in the process:** Learners question to determine the role they can play in the process.

Pat Nelson is an adult educator and staff development coordinator working at Second Start, the adult education center in Concord, NH. Pat also works with *The Right Question Project*.



# Reading Your Way to a Promotion

by Ernest Best

Ed Castor, an adult learner living in Indiana, has struggled with a learning difference for his entire life. Yet, for most of his life, he didn't know it. For many years Ed successfully accomplished the difficult task of keeping his inability to read a secret, even from those closest to him, such as his friends and colleagues at one of the largest corporations in the nation, General Motors (GM).

Ed was judged to be an exceptional worker. Over the years he had spent at GM, Ed was offered promotion after promotion. Yet, he turned them all down. As Ed says, "I worked at General Motors for twenty-five years, and had hidden my inability to read. We [non-readers] are very intelligent people. We know how to hide things like that. But as time went on, I had to start doing paper work and keeping records."

Finally, he was offered yet another promotion. It would have increased his salary by over eight thousand (\$8,000.00) dollars; Ed turned that down as well! His boss just couldn't understand why he wouldn't take advantage of such an excellent opportunity. Then, for the first time, Ed revealed that he could not read. And that is when his life took a dramatic turn. Because of the fact that Ed admitted his inability to read, he was able to get the help that he needed. Subsequently, he was diagnosed with a learning difference. Ed remembers, "I went to work with a tutor and one day she began to read to me about people with dyslexia. I'd never heard of it before. I said, "Oh my gosh, this is everything I've been going through! It was a relief for me, because it gave me a reason why I was going through the struggle to learn all my life. I wasn't dumb, or stupid like some people might have thought. I had a learning difference!"

Ed has been invited to several places around the country to speak of what an adult literacy program has done for him. At a special national television program taped at the White House, called the National Literacy Honors, Ed was one of the honorees recognized as having done special things for education. That is where Ed was asked by a GM executive to do something to help other employees who needed the assis-

tance that Ed had gotten to improve *his* life. In a joint project with General Motors and the United Auto Workers Union, Ed helped to develop a thirty million dollar (\$30,000,000.00) educational program that would improve the lives of GM workers and their families across the country. From GM, Ed received the title of "Key Lead Person for Employee Excellence Development" for this program.

Since learning how to read, Ed has gone on to obtain the GED credential, and has attended college at Anderson University in Indiana. He is the vice chairman for the Indiana Literacy Foundation, the organization that provides funds, knowledge and contacts for people and programs throughout the state. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of VALUE (Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education), a national organization of former and current adult literacy students. The organization is dedicated to advancing the cause of adult literacy throughout the United States. In addition, he was recognized as one of former President George Bush's, "One Thousand Points of Light," and has taken part in several functions on behalf of literacy with former First Lady Barbara Bush. He has also spoken at the United Nations on behalf of literacy.

The accomplishments of Ed Castor prove that, in spite of not knowing how to read and having a learning difference, with determination you can still make it. To other adult learners, Ed says, "You must really realize that you are not the only one in this situation; so often we think we are. Don't spend your life worrying about what you can't do, but spend your life accomplishing the things that you want to do. The things that you can do well, do them, and the others will come along."

*Ernest Best is the executive director of the Massachusetts Alliance for Adult Literacy (Mass AAL), an organization run by current and former adult learners. A former student of an adult ed. program, Ernest has gone from being a consumer of adult ed. services to a provider of adult ed. services to disadvantaged groups in Boston. Contact him at (617) 782-8956 ext. 13, or by e-mail: ernest@alri.org.*

# Plain English is for Everyone

by Archie Willard

If you really want someone to understand you, you make real efforts to use language they'll understand. Most of us need to use forms, leaflets, agreements, and contracts to get public information. Yet a lot of people, even those with good reading and writing skills, have trouble understanding legal documents, bureaucratic forms and letters, health information, and many other kinds of written communication. This is not right. People should be able to read such documents, think about what they've read, then make their own decisions.

If things were written in Plain English, a lot more people would know what was going on around them. The things we sort out in our everyday business such as insurance, banking, health care, etc., would be less confusing. Taking away the barriers to understanding would help us open our minds and develop the talents that are inside us.

As a dyslexic person who has struggled with both written and spoken language, I often find it hard to understand others when they use terms from their professional language. People like me have had so much shame in our lives that we don't bother to ask others what they mean when we don't understand what they are saying. And it's not just people with literacy problems who don't ask; it is anyone who doesn't want to appear "dumb." Because we don't understand and we don't ask, we do things or we sign things that we should not have and we get taken advantage of. This can include using credit cards, making investments, and getting overcharged for our long distance services, among other things. Reducing confusing language will help people understand the world around them, express themselves, and make informed life choices.

The Plain English Movement, started in the United Kingdom, tries to get documents written at a level that the average person can under-

stand. I have worked with other adult learners to help move the Plain English Movement forward here in the United States. One example was when we worked with the Iowa Secretary of State to make voting more understandable in our state. The Iowa Secretary of State came to the New Readers of Iowa State Conference and brought sample ballots. The Iowa New Readers looked at all of the different kinds of ballots and told him the ones that were difficult to understand and the ones that we could understand. The New Readers from South Dakota also did the same thing in their state.

Another success was working with the American Medical Association and the New Readers of Illinois to make a video for medical doctors and their staff to raise awareness about people with reading problems who seek medical care.

The Plain English Movement is about social justice for the people whose lives have been confused by the written language. If things we need to read in our daily lives were written at a level we all can understand it would give people more control over their lives and more chances to participate in society.

#### Plain English Movement Web sites:

Plain Language Association International:  
[www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org)

The Plain Language Action & Information Network:  
[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)

Plain English Campaign in Britain:  
[www.plainenglish.co.uk/index.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/index.html)

*Archie Willard has been involved with literacy ever since learning to read at age 54. He is President Emeritus of Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE), a national adult learner organization, and has been a member of The New Readers of Iowa for the past 13 years.*

## Using the Venom to Heal the Bite

by Deborah Schwartz

A Contextual Naming Exercise

### Introduction

The following is a three-part activity designed to explore one aspect of language use: the naming of self and others. The goal of this activity is not to reach consensus about what one group of people chooses to call itself, nor even to reach consensus within that group about the best way to self-identify, but rather to explore how words, names and name-calling are codes or labels that have the power to liberate, increase positive visibility, oppress, belittle, violate, or make something or someone lovingly known—all depending on the intention and context of the usage.

### Getting Ready

If the class has set up discussion ground rules, now may be a time to go over them and to revise them if need be. If the class hasn't set up discussion ground rules, now may be a time to generate some.

Also, it can help for you to explain the purpose of the activity: exploring language and power, and to contextualize the activity within program and language learning goals: i.e., creating safe classrooms, learning more about American culture, learning new language bases, etc.

Finally, you want to make sure you have program support to do this kind of activity. You may even use the activity as a staff development tool before you bring it to your classroom.

### ACTIVITY I: WORKING DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENCE AND POWER

**Objective:** To encourage a class discussion about difference and power, both empowerment (the act of gaining power) and disempowerment (the act of losing it or the state of never having had it in the first place).

- On a note card, or sheet of paper, students can write about a time when they felt different from the other members of a group. This notion of "feeling different" may need examples and/or translation depending on the particular students, prior classroom discussions, and the English vocabulary base of the students. If students would like examples of feeling or being different, here are some: a religious difference, a language difference, a cultural or racial difference, a gender difference, an experience of grieving in a group of people who are celebrating, a differing political view, a differing social-economic background, a different age, etc.
- In pairs or small groups, discuss what that experience was like. This should be an invitation to have an open-ended conversation about the complexity of being different in a group. Ask someone to take notes of the discussion.
- Share these notes in a whole class discussion having the teacher or someone who feels comfortable jotting down positive, negative, and neutral experiences of being different and of being similar, and of key concepts and questions that emerge in the discussion. (For example, assimilation, standing out, hiding difference, fear of repercussions or actual repercussion for identifying as being different, acceptance and appreciation for expressing difference, ignoring difference, incorporating the difference into the conversation of the group, cultural takes on difference: i.e., Could this be a particularly North American cultural notion? etc).
- As a whole group, or back in small groups, discuss the conditions or criteria that were necessary for the difference to be a good, bad, or neutral experience for the students. Keep taking notes about key concepts and questions. Don't expect or try to reach consensus. State clearly that this discussion is not about reaching consensus, but about talking about being different and feeling different.
- As a whole group discuss the concept of power, having it, not having it, and gaining it.
- Come up with working definitions of *power* and *powerlessness* as well as working definitions of the verbal phrases *becoming empowered*, and *becoming disempowered*. Note that the verb structure: "becoming empowered or disempowered" connotes change—growth or regression along a spectrum.
- Ask students to go back to their original writings about a time they felt different and a time they felt similar and ask them to further think about whether or not they had power in that group.

This may generate more class discussion, or it may not. But now the class is thinking more about power and powerlessness in group settings. This particular conversation will provide the background for the next activity.



International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC)



## ACTIVITY II: WHAT ARE NAMES FOR?

**Objective:** To create a vocabulary base, a language, in which to talk about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. In addition, this part of the activity will help teachers facilitate a conversation about the power of words and the consequences of using words to hurt and using words to heal.

Whole group discussion about names:

1. Do you have more than one name or a nickname?
2. Who gave it to you and what does it mean to you when people use it?
3. Have you ever given someone else a loving nickname (i.e., your children or partner)?
4. Can you think of other “names” that you call others or that others call you that are positive and affectionate?
5. What are some social groups that you belong to (women, people of color, etc.)? What names do other people call those groups? How do you respond to them?
6. Does it matter who is calling you that name, or their intention or purpose, or is it the name itself that makes it an endearing one?

Sometimes names are given to us with love to recognize who we are as individual people; e.g., in some traditions children are named to establish a legacy between ancestors and the newborn. Sometimes names are given to us, or assigned to us for seemingly neutral reasons, as way to categorize us as different but as still equal. At other times, names are given to us to show a power differential, e.g., to say that one group with one name is human, normal, good, and the other is less-than human, abnormal, and bad. What else can names do?

We're going to focus on the negative aspect of naming for the next part of the activity. As a class, generate a list of names that are meant to dehumanize and make the person feel “less than?”

**Note to teacher:** You can make this an optional activity. If you do this part of the activity, you'll want to check in with students about why you're doing this part of the activity: to show the power of such name-calling. Or you may want to have people write these words individually and then pass them in later, creating a list of these words to share at the next class. You may also want to engage in some cathartic exercise for you and your students with these words, ripping them up or crossing them off once the activity is completed.

## ACTIVITY III: NAMING OTHERS/NAMING OURSELVES

**Objective:** To synthesize parts one and two of the activity by having students reflect on how language, including the act of name-calling and self-naming, have specific and sometimes conflicting meanings.

In the following scenarios, how does name-calling create a climate that is empowering or disempowering for the person/group talked about?

**Directions for Teachers:** Students will be considering how the conversation affects or impacts the person that the speakers are referring to, not the people who are doing the speaking. For each scenario students will rate how empowering or disempowering the “name-calling” experience is for the person who is being spoken about.

Note that each scenario includes the use of a “derogatory” name for a target group (e.g., fag or dyke). What happens when a person who identifies as a member of the target group uses the “derogatory” name? What happens when someone who is not a member of the target group used the “derogatory” name? Why are there differences? Is there such a thing as reclaiming a “put-down”? Is there such a thing as using the venom to heal the wound?

Also, please consider your own feelings about and your particular location to this activity before you bring it to your classroom.

- 1) Empowering                      2) Slightly Empowering                      3) Neutral                      4) Slightly Disempowering

\_\_\_\_\_ Two lesbians are talking privately about a new co-worker. They refer to her as that “new dyke” at school.

\_\_\_\_\_ Two lesbians are talking with others in the teachers' room about a new co-worker who is not present. They refer to her as that “new dyke” at school.

\_\_\_\_\_ Two straight male colleagues are talking privately about a new co-worker. They refer to her as that “new dyke” at school.

\_\_\_\_\_ Two straight male colleagues are talking with others in the teachers' room about a new co-worker who is not present. They refer to her as that “new dyke” at school.

\_\_\_\_\_ A male teacher comes out to his class. He refers to himself as “gay.” Later, an out gay male student in his class is joking with the teacher and says, “you're such a fag.”

\_\_\_\_\_ Two straight male students are joking with one another in class. One says to the other, “You're such a fag.”

## WRAP-UP REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What's a question that I still have about the use of these words?
2. Did I find this activity difficult, enjoyable, a little of both, or neither?
3. What happened in the classroom that was difficult or challenging?
4. What happened in the classroom that was a surprise?
5. Did my thinking change at all about the use of these words?
6. How do I rate this activity on a scale of 1-10? (One being the lowest and ten being the highest.) Why have I given it this score?

# Deconstructing Euphemisms

by Pat Nelson

**Objective:** To introduce the concept of propaganda and focus on one propaganda technique—the use of euphemisms in speaking and writing.

Propaganda occurs when someone manipulates information for the purpose of influencing public opinion. Propagandists (those who engage in propaganda) deliberately emphasize specific information that supports their position on an issue and ignore or exclude information that does not. Propagandists use misleading statements and even lies to convince the public to agree with them. There are many different propaganda techniques that are routinely used by lobbyists, advertisers, and other groups. Our most common experience with propaganda may be in the area of politics and government. For example, in times of war, propaganda is used to rally public support for military forces, justify the purpose of the war, and downplay the tragic consequences of war.

In this lesson, we are going to explore how euphemisms are used in writing and speaking. Euphemisms have been used for centuries. A euphemism is one word that is substituted for another. Generally, it is the substitution of a soft or vague term for one that is considered insulting, overly harsh or offensive. Euphemisms are often used to hide the reality of what is being communicated to make it more acceptable. For example, the use of the expression “passed on” instead of “dying.”

We use euphemisms all the time in our ordinary conversations. As people accept them, they become rooted in our speech patterns. But euphemisms also play a more harmful role when those in power use them to disguise the severity, reality, or level of discomfort of conditions that might cause the public to question or strenuously object to a particular action or situation. These types of euphemisms are routinely used by government organizations, political action committees, and corporations, among others. For example, the use of the term “downsizing” for “laying off workers.”

Use the following sentences to develop an understanding of euphemisms and explore the different ways they are used.

Present the following list of sentences:

- 1) When asked what his father did, the young boy replied that he was **between jobs**.
- 2) At the restaurant, the mother took her daughter to the **little girls’ room**.
- 3) The store had to raise prices because they had a problem with **inventory shrinkage**.
- 4) Every afternoon, the **sanitation engineers** came on duty at three p.m.
- 5) At the job fair, there was a booth that detailed the rewards of becoming a **peace officer**.
- 6) The women in the poster advertising the movie was **well-endowed**.

Have the class give a more common meaning of the underlined words and phrases. You can write them on newsprint or on the board so everyone can see them. Have students discuss why we tend to use the words in the sentences instead of the more common ones. Review the definition of euphemism.

Have the class come up with their own list of examples of words or phrases we use to soften the reality of different situations or descriptions.

Present the following groups of terms one at a time to show how government agencies, businesses, advertisers, and others use euphemisms. (Feel free to add your own examples.) Discuss each term’s use before moving on. Solicit the reasons why the euphemism is used instead of the more direct word(s). What is the affect on the reader or listener of being exposed to the more innocuous term? What might happen if the basic meanings were used instead of the euphemisms? There are three groups of terms: those that most of the students will know, those that some might know, and those that might need some explanation from the teacher. After each one has been discussed, have students use them in sentences.

**Group 1:**

Pink slip  
Liquidation sale  
Downsized  
Laid off

**Group 2:**

Internal Revenue Service  
Embroidering the facts  
Regime change

**Group 3:**

Ethnic cleansing  
Air support  
Collateral damage  
Smart bomb

For those euphemisms that you feel students might not know, bring in excerpts from magazines or newspapers that use them in context to help them figure out the meanings.

Have the students discuss the following questions:

1. What did you learn by going through this activity?
2. How will what you learned change the way you listen to a news broadcast, read a newspaper or magazine article, or watch an advertisement?
3. What clues can you look for to determine if a euphemism is being used?
4. Why is it important to be aware that euphemisms are used by those in power positions?

To reinforce the lesson, have the students bring in examples of euphemisms that they find in their reading or listening. Create a classroom list. Would you keep the examples in this activity and article on your list? Why or why not?

Euphemisms are only one form of propaganda, but it is likely to be a form that students can readily identify with. Once they learn how and why euphemisms are used as propaganda, you can move to additional lessons on other types of propaganda. These lessons can be an effective way of developing the critical reading and listening skills of learners.

**For more information on how euphemisms are used visit:**  
[www.propaganda101.com/Propaganda/NewsMediaProp](http://www.propaganda101.com/Propaganda/NewsMediaProp)  
[www.iteslj.org/lessons/Alkire-Euphemisms.html](http://www.iteslj.org/lessons/Alkire-Euphemisms.html)

*Pat Nelson is an adult educator and staff development coordinator working at Second Start, the adult education center in Concord, NH.*

## Problems of a Language in a Democratic State

by June Jordan

I worry about the notion of a democratic state. Do we really believe 11.5 percent unemployment represents God’s will? Is that why the powerful say, “Unemployment has emerged”? If that construction strikes your ear as somehow ridiculous because, quite rightly, it conjures up the phenomenon of unemployment as if it emerges from nowhere into nothing, then what sense do you make of this very familiar construction used, very often, by the powerless: ‘I lost my job.’ Who in his or her right mind loses a job? What should I understand if you say something like that to me? Should I suppose that one morning you got up and drank your coffee and left the house but, then, you just couldn’t find your job? If that’s not what anybody means then why don’t we say, ‘GM laid off half the night shift. They fired me.’

Who did what to whom? Who’s responsible?

We have a rather foggy mess and not much hope for a democratic state when the powerless agree to use a language that blames the victim for the deeds of the powerful.

As in: ‘I was raped.’ What should we conclude from that most sadly passive use of language? By definition, nobody in her right mind can say that, and mean it. For rape to occur, somebody real has to rape somebody else, equally real. Rape presupposes a rapist and his victim. The victim must learn to make language tell her own truth: He raped me.

But the victim accommodates to power. The victim doesn’t want any more trouble; someone has already fired him or someone has already raped her, and so the victim uses words to evade a further confrontation with the powerful.

By itself, our language cannot refuse to reflect the agonizing process of alienation from ourselves. If we collaborate with the powerful then our language will lose its currency as a means to tell the truth in order to change the truth.



# Does this look like a “Peace Keeper” to you?

This 2003 holiday season, JC Penney offered this toy targeted to children ages 3 and up. Here is the description from JC Penney’s Web site:

## World Peace Keepers Battle Station

\$24.99

Includes one 12" poseable action figure, cannon with tripod and 40-pc. accessory set. Cannon has working lights and sound; requires 2 “AA” batteries, included. Accessory set includes everything needed to stage a battle.

Plastic. 2 lbs. Ages 3 and up.



From a Web-based critique of the toy:

For that special child in your life, you can put a “World Peace Keepers Battle Station” under the tree.

Just in case the kids are feeling confused this year about how acting as an aggressive superpower bully helps preserve world peace, you can help them sort it all out with this accessory set that “includes everything needed to stage a battle.” Poseable action figures and cannons (with working lights and sound) use up the kids’ creative playtime to reinforce the notion the peace is best preserved by blowing lots of people up.

Available from J.C. Penney for only \$24.99.

If kids are short on imagination—what would this peaceful world look like, after all?—J.C. Penney offers another toy, the “Forward Command Post,” featuring a “pre-destroyed home” complete with a soldier and an American flag. All that’s missing are the dead civilians, also known as collateral damage, guilty of having the audacity to live their lives right in the path of the oncoming world peace keepers. (After intense public pressure, JC Penney pulled the “Forward Command Post” toy from their catalogue. The “Peace Keepers Battle Station” is still available.)

## Unequal Naming: The Gulf War 1991

In 1993, Hilary Janks, an educator in South Africa, developed this activity to look more closely at the language used during the 1991 Gulf War. This comparison of language use was originally published in a British newspaper, *The Guardian Weekly*.

More than 10 years after the 1991 Gulf War, the United States is again mounting a conflict against Iraq. Janks’ activity has renewed relevance for us today as we see a similar situation being played out.

### Some questions:

1. Have you ever seen a comparison of language like this published in a US newspaper? If not, would you expect to? Why?
2. What are the words the US media uses to describe the US military and the Iraqi military? Are some of these same words used? Why?
3. In the current conflict, which other countries are supporting the US? Can you think of reasons for this?
4. What differences do you see between the 1991 Gulf War and today’s conflict with Iraq?
5. What are the similarities?

1. Think of all the purposes of creating double standards for us and them.

2. What effect does the word we have on the newspaper's readers?

3. What effect does the word they have on the newspaper's readers?

4. What do these words mean?

	THE ENGLISH (Read across from left to right)	THE IRAQIS
	We have Army, Navy and Airforce Reporting guidelines Press briefings	They have A war machine Censorship Propaganda
	We Take out Suppress Eliminate Our men are Boys Lads Our boys are Cautious Confident	They Kill Destroy Kill Their men are Troops Hordes Theirs are Cowardly Desperate
5. Compare these	Knights of the skies Loyal Brave We Precision bomb George Bush is ... At peace with himself Resolute Statesmanlike Assured Our planes Fail to return from missions	Bastards of Baghdad Blindly obedient Fanatical They Fire wildly at anything Saddam Husseln is ... Demented Defiant An evil tyrant A crackpot monster Their planes Are shot out of the sky
6. What does resolute mean?	two metaphors	
7. Show that this is a euphemism and find another euphemism.	what is a fanatic?	
8. All the expressions above have been used by the British Press in covering the war so far.	9. Throughout the Gulf War the West portrayed Hussein as a villain. Why?	

Guardian Weekly, 3 February 1991.

10. What effects does *The Guardian* achieve by collecting and presenting this language to its readers?

From *Language, Identity & Power*. Copyright © 1993 by Hilary Janks. Published by Hodder & Stoughton Educational, South Africa. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

## Black Lies/White Lies

by Nancy Schneidewind and Ellen Davidson

### Objective:

To help students understand how connotations in our language perpetuate racism.

### Materials:

Dictionaries, paper, pencils, chart paper, markers.

### Implementation:

Tell students they will work on an activity to examine language. Teach the term “connotation.” Divide students into groups of five. Give each group a large sheet of paper. They list all the words or phrases they can think of that have the word “white” or “black” in them. For example, “black lies,” “black eye,” “white as snow.” After ten minutes the groups mark their lists as follows: “+” for a phrase with a positive connotation, “-” for one with a negative connotation, and “0” for one with a neutral connotation. Groups then look up the words “white” and “black” in their dictionaries and write down definitions. It is helpful if different groups have different dictionaries. Use dictionaries as advanced as they can handle. The class joins together. Appoint a recorder to stand at the front of the room. Starting with “black,” each group calls out a word or phrase with “black” in it. Record these along with their markings of “+,” “-,” and “0.” Take turns until all the groups have their ideas listed. Then do the same for “white.” Similarly, list dictionary definitions.

### Discussion:

1. How many “black” words have positive connotations? How about “white” words? How many of each have negative connotations?
2. What reactions do you have as you look at this list?
3. How might black people feel hearing these words and phrases all the time? How about white people?
4. Many of our ideas are formed through language. Our feelings about ourselves often come from words we hear. What does our language imply about white people? About black people?

From Schneidewind, N. & Davidson, E., *Open Minds to Equality: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities to Promote Race, Sex, Class, and Age Equity*, 2e. Published by Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA. Copyright © 1998 by Pearson Education. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

## From the American Heritage Dictionary

**black** (blāk) *n.* **1.** The darkest of all colors; the opposite of white. **2.** A member of a Negroid people; Negro. *a.* **1.** Of or nearly of the color black. **2.** Without light. **3.** Belonging to an ethnic group having dark skin, esp. Negroid. **4.** Gloomy; depressing. **5.** Evil; wicked. **6.** Angry; sullen.

**white** (hwīt, wīt) *n.* **1.** An achromatic color of maximum lightness; the opposite of black. **2.** The white or nearly white part of something, as an egg. **4.** A member of a Caucasoid people; Caucasian. *–adj.* **1.** Being of or nearly of the color white. **2.** Light-colored; pale. **3.** Of, pertaining to, or belonging to an ethnic group having a comparatively pale skin, esp. Caucasian. **4.** Pale gray or silvery, as from age. **5.** Snowy. **6.** Incandescent. **7.** Pure; innocent.



# Resources

## American Tongues

Produced and Directed by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker.

From Web site:

For over ten years American Tongues has entertained and educated audiences from the high school level on up. It is in used in thousands of colleges, universities, corporate training offices, military installations, TESL classes, and other institutions. American Tongues has been an enormously useful teaching tool for helping students and workers hear examples of regional speech and attitudes and relate them to their own lives. Study Guide and complete transcript available from "Ordering" section of Web site.

Purchase: \$285 or \$150 for shorter, High School version Rental: \$85  
Available from CNAM Film Library  
800-343-5540  
www.cnam.com



## The Real Ebonics Debate Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children

Edited by Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit

From Web site:

Though K-12 focused, "The Real Ebonics Debate" is an insightful look at the political nature of language, and its unbreakable connections to race and class in America. Some of our most important educators, linguists, and writers—as well as teachers and students reporting from the field—examine the lessons of the Ebonics controversy and unravel complexities of the issue that have never been acknowledged.

"The Real Ebonics Debate" is based on a special issue of Rethinking Schools published in the fall of 1997. This 227-page book is published in collaboration with Beacon Press of Boston.

\$10.00 Available from Rethinking Schools  
800-669-4192  
www.rethinkingschools.org/publication

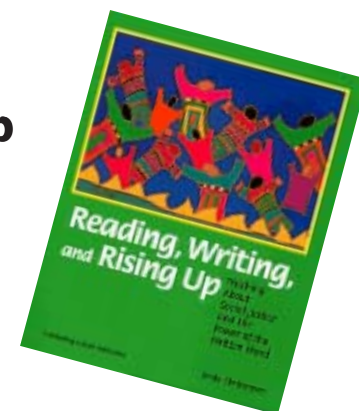
## Reading, Writing, and Rising Up Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word

by Linda Christensen

From Web site:

This practical, inspirational book offers essays, lesson plans, and a remarkable collection of student writing, all rooted in an unwavering focus on language arts teaching for justice.

\$12.95 Available from Rethinking Schools  
800-669-4192  
www.rethinkingschools.org/publication



## Linguistic Genocide in Education - or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?

by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 2000. 785 pgs.

From a review by Erik Jacobson, Harvard University Graduate School of Education:

This passionately argued text is a mixture of self-professed utopian thinking and clear sighted accounts of actually existing conditions. The author presents a wide ranging and complex argument with a great deal of supporting evidence. By placing the issue of linguistic human rights in a broader sociopolitical context, the author helps the reader makes clear connections between the functioning of power and the health of languages, and provides an opportunity to be critical of language policies that claim to be apolitical or simply concerned with viability. The clarity of the argument and the wealth of background details provides a depth that makes the book much more than a political tract. As an exhaustive summary of previous research and a clearly articulated program for progress, it could become a touchstone in the linguistic human rights movement.

## New Resources from World Education

### Take on the Challenge A Source Book from the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project

by Elizabeth Morrish, Jenny Horsman, and Judy Hofer



This beautifully-produced new resource with photos and original artwork is primarily for teachers, but will be useful for all educators and activists interested in anti-violence work. It is an analysis of the effects of violence and a practical collection of ideas and activities, with examples from teachers working in GED, native language literacy, ABE, ESOL, welfare-to-work, corrections, and shelter settings. It shows how they successfully changed their curriculum and learning environment to address the impact of violence on learning. Based on the foundation of Jenny Horsman's research, practitioners focused on well-being and incorporated counseling and creative arts—collage, quilting, movement, and meditation—into the classroom.

\$15.00 Available from World Education  
617-482-9485 E-mail: skurtz@worlded.org

### Announcing A New Web Resource

#### Health & Literacy Special Collection [www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs](http://www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs)

To learn about other health resources designed for use in adult basic education and literacy programs, visit the *LINCS Health & Literacy Special Collection* [www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs](http://www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs). This Web site will link you to free and low cost, print and web-based health curriculum, teaching activities, easy-to-read materials and Web sites. The site is maintained by World Education's Health & Literacy Initiative with support from the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and its LINCS program. LINCS is a national effort to provide web-based access to information for practitioners in the field.

To order *Take on the Challenge* or for more information about the LINCS Health & Literacy Special Collection, please contact Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi at 617-482-9485 or [skurtz@worlded.org](mailto:skurtz@worlded.org).

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Adult Education for Social Justice: News, Issues & Ideas

# THE CHANGE AGENT

Published by  
New England Literacy Resource Center

# THE CHANGE AGENT

## CALL FOR ARTICLES FOR THE NEXT ISSUE

### THEME: Housing

**Educators and Adult Learners:** We are looking for lessons, activities, and student writings that reflect on housing's effect on our lives, as well as how teaching about housing affects our classrooms.

#### Questions for students and teachers to think about:

- What happens when the topic of housing emerges in the classroom? What activities, resources and approaches have been most successful? Which literacy skills get tapped into and practiced?
- Describe and reflect on your current living situation and on your housing dreams.
- How do you advocate and make change to bring about better housing conditions?

#### All articles must be received by April 15, 2003.

All articles will be considered. Final decisions are made by *The Change Agent* Editorial Board.

Please send material (by email or PC disk) to:  
Deborah Schwartz c/o Angela Orlando, World Education 44 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210  
phone: (617) 482-9485 fax: (617) 482-0617  
email: aorlando@worlded.org



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*The mission of The Change Agent is to provide, in the form of a low-cost newspaper, news, issues, ideas, and other teaching resources that inspire and enable adult educators and learners to make civic participation and social justice related concerns part of their teaching and learning.*

In New England, *The Change Agent* will continue to be available free of charge in limited quantities through the New England Literacy Resource Center's affiliated State Literacy Resource Centers (SABES, ATDN, CALL, Vermont Adult Education Board, Literacy Resources/Rhode Island, New Hampshire Department of Education). Contact these centers for more information.

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