

THE DIVERSITY KIT

**An Introductory Resource for
Social Change in Education**



PART III:
LANGUAGE



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The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence. Information about LAB programs and services is available by contacting:



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We live in a world connected through language. All human beings have the desire to communicate, and this is achieved largely through language. In fact, as Fromkin and Rodman (1998) have observed, “wherever humans exist, language exists” (p. 26). Given the universal nature of language, it might not appear to be worthy of study. But upon closer scrutiny, it is clear that language acquisition and language use are deeply complex phenomena. Language production is not only a physiological event but a process deeply embedded in culture.

In this section of *The Diversity Kit*, we ground our understanding of language in culture and cultural context. The noted sociolinguist Joshua Fishman (1991) has described three connections between language and culture:

- **Language indexes culture:** A language that has grown with a culture is the best language through which to describe and communicate that culture.
- **Language symbolizes culture:** Language reflects the status and social positioning of a culture.
- **Culture is partly created from its language:** Certain cultural events such as rituals, storytelling, folktales, and greetings are deeply intertwined in language. A shift to using a new language will signify a shift in culture.

In this section of *The Diversity Kit*, we highlight the fact that language and culture are deeply intertwined. We also maintain that all language varieties, including what is traditionally referred to as dialect, pidgin or Creole, are equally complex systems of communication that are appropriate to meet the communicative needs of a particular speech community.

In the first chapter, Language, Culture, and Schooling, we introduce the reader to cultural differences in communication style and language use. We consider language attitudes and explore variations in language, including African American Vernacular English.

In the second chapter, we delve into theories underlying second language acquisition, the developmental stages of second language acquisition, and some of the educational programs and models that support bilingualism and biliteracy. In this chapter, we ask the reader to become an “educational linguist” and to explore the ways that language is used in the communities of culturally and linguistically diverse students. We underscore that students’ knowledge of language and language use can be powerful tools that challenge existing social inequities.

Finally, in the last two sections, we explore language as it relates to literacy and language and assessment. We review some of the areas of linguistics that educators need to be familiar with, such as phonology, morphology, and syntax. These areas, along with an understanding of print, appropriate literary styles, and purposes for reading, make up the complex process of literacy acquisition. We present language assessment and introduce the reader to measures that can be used to assess language proficiency. Here, we differentiate between language difficulties—which are common occurrences in the natural progression of second language acquisition—and language deficiencies, with which second language learners are often misdiagnosed, causing them to be disproportionately represented in special education classes.

As with the sections on human development and culture, we urge the reader to engage in ongoing conversations in their schools and communities that address issues of diversity and the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Through the activities and vignettes presented, we ask the reader to explore language variation and use. We also challenge the reader to raise questions about complex social phenomena and inequities, questions that may not offer simple solutions but do illuminate pathways toward social change.

Citations

Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Fromkin, V. & Rodman, R. (1998). *An introduction to language* (6th ed.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, and SCHOOLING

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How do cultural linguistic backgrounds influence how students use language?*
 - ? *Why is language such an important factor in the classroom?*
 - ? *What do teachers need to know about so-called “non-standard” varieties of English in order to teach their students successfully?*
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