

*[E]ducational failure is often ... language failure... [A] minimum requirement for an educationally relevant approach to language is that it takes account of the child's own linguistic experience, defining this experience in terms of its richest potential and noting where there may be differences of orientation which would cause certain children difficulties in school. (Halliday, 1973, pp. 18-20)*

It has been said that every language represents a way of thinking (Fanon cited in Smitherman, 1998). It is understandable then that language is the most important tool for transmitting culture from one generation to another. In fact, culture and language are so thoroughly intertwined that loss of one leads to loss of the other (Brown, Hammond, & Onikama, 1997; Fishman, 1991; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Virtually all learning experiences involve language to some degree. Symbolizing is the basis of human intelligence, and language is the primary tool we use to symbolize what we experience and think (Crystal, 1987; Gardner, 1983; Oller, 1991; Vygotsky, 1962). It is no wonder that language plays such an important role or that we tend to regard literacy (or the literate use of oral language) as the essential indicator of an educated person. But language is used in different ways by different cultural groups, and what counts as appropriate usage of language differs from group to group. Languages have evolved to serve the cultural needs of their speakers, and language is the principal vehicle for cultural transmission across generations. Just as culture influences our theories of child development (what we take to be normal and desirable development), culture influences how we use language and what we take to be normal language development (Eriks-Brophy & Crago, 1993; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1971; Nelson-Barber, 1997; Philips, 1983).

To succeed within their own cultural group, all children need to learn not only the linguistic code of that group but the ways in which language is used (Heath, 1986). Language use includes the goals of speaking (i.e., what is accomplished by using language) as well as rules about when children should speak, to whom they may speak,

*Culture and language are so thoroughly intertwined that loss of one leads to loss of the other.*

and the circumstances surrounding what topics are spoken (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). These are the pragmatic or social expectations surrounding language. Children learn these conventions along with the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of a language, but these aspects of language are so automatic (and learned so unconsciously) that neither children, their parents, nor their teachers tend to be consciously aware of them. Some researchers believe that language use is the most powerful cultural element in the classroom (Heath, 1986; Villegas, 1991).

*Teachers' first impressions of children are often based on the ways they use language (Ramirez, 1985).*

## The Ability of Language to Shape Life Chances

It could be argued that we do not create language, it creates us. The language surrounding children teaches them who they are, what their place in the world is, and what they need to do to become autonomous and valuable citizens. If they are unable to interact with and negotiate a culture's discourses with critical insight and confidence, they will be less autonomous and more likely to be dependent on others. "Discourses" refers to the daily linguistic interactions, both academic and social, that take place either in or outside of school. People become empowered when they can use and adapt language for

their own purposes, but too often the discourse of the dominant culture (and the school) displaces the discourse of students from minority or nondominant cultures (Gutiérrez, Stone, & Larson, in press).

Success in education is highly dependent on people's ability to display knowledge, usually through the spoken or written word. Teachers' first impressions of children are often based on the ways they use language (Ramirez, 1985). In later stages of education, verbal contact through formal or informal assessments is the main link between students and those who decide their educational fate. In fact, formal education is largely a process of teaching the rules for using words and other signs used in academic meaning systems and then judging how well those rules have been learned. Beyond school, the life chances of students are determined by their ability to interact with the discourses around them. The structures of these interactions and activities are based upon assumptions and expectations about language and communication. Much of the discourse that controls outcomes for children is shaped by (and shapes)

institutions over which culturally and linguistically diverse parents have little influence. Schools need to be more linguistically flexible than other institutions if they want to improve the life chances of language minority students.

## Cultural Differences in Communication Style and Language Use

Communication styles vary across cultures, and communication norms are expressions of each culture's values. Cultures have informal rules that govern speaking, listening, and turn-taking behaviors. However, teachers sometimes overlook how a child's culture's own expectations for communication and interaction may be very different from the dominant patterns in schools. They regard children who come from non-dominant linguistic and cultural groups as unresponsive, disruptive, or slow learners. When the cultural communication styles of students within a school are diverse, no single style of communication should be deemed the only acceptable one in the classroom.

Children whose ways of using language differ from those approved in school may find school language conventions baffling. Such children have learned different conventions than those required for participating in the classroom. If their teachers do not have information about their students' cultures, they may believe the children are shy, slow, or nonverbal (Dumont, 1979; Labov, 1969; Philips, 1983). Studies with American Indian students and African American students have shown that students' levels of verbal responsiveness depend on social circumstances, how questions are posed, and who is posing the questions (Labov, 1972; Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). Other research with Hawaiian and Navajo students has shown how different classroom organization patterns can lead to good or poor student participation (Au & Jordan, 1981; McCarty & Schaffer, 1992).

There are numerous examples of ways that students differ in language use. For instance, conventions for telling stories—an activity all children are asked to do as early as kindergarten—vary tremendously (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981). Some cultures or cultural groups use a

*When the cultural communication styles of students within a school are diverse, no single style of communication should be deemed the only acceptable one in the classroom.*

**topic-associating**

An episodic style to telling a story in which a string of personal anecdotes makes up the discourse.

**topic-centered**

An approach to telling a story that establishes a primary topic and structures the story around it.

*topic-associating* or episodic style, in which a string of personal anecdotes makes up the discourse. The theme of a string may not be immediately clear to the listener because there is no evident beginning, middle, or end. Dominant-culture teachers in the U.S. are often more comfortable working with children who use a *topic-centered* style. A topic-centered approach to telling a story establishes a primary topic and structures the story around it. Teachers need to be aware of the different possible ways of telling stories if they are to understand children from nondominant cultural backgrounds.

Howard Smith (1998) cites Shirley Brice Heath's comparison of the storytelling styles of two communities, one African American and one white:

People in both Trackton and Roadville spend a lot of time telling stories. Yet the form, occasions, content, and functions of their stories differ greatly. They structure their stories differently; they hold different scales of features on which stories are recognized as stories and judged as good or bad... [The white] community allows only stories which are factual and have little exaggeration; the other uses reality only as the germ of a highly creative fictionalized account. (p. 184)

As Heath notes, these communities share a common emphasis on storytelling but differ in how they understand what a story is and how it ought to be told.

The need to understand students' storytelling approaches is just one reason why teachers need to understand *sociolinguistics*. Sociolinguists study language forms, language use, and the relationship between language and society (Crystal, 1987). Without some sociolinguistic knowledge, teachers may perceive differences in children's language as deficits and thereby perpetuate biases in judgments about what children are capable of learning. Ethnographic research is one way teachers can learn about the discourse styles of their particular students and communities.

**sociolinguistics**

The study of language forms, language use, and the relationship between language and society.

 **ACTIVITY:** Exploring Storytelling

- *Invite class members and their families to a culture-sharing evening. Have a storytelling hour, during which family members can tell stories that were told to them as young people.*
- *Reflect on the forms and structures of the stories you heard from members of different cultural groups and consider this information when listening to class members.*
- *Take an opportunity to share stories from your community—past or present—with colleagues in your school. Take time to discuss the differences in storytelling you observe.*

*Some cultures embrace indirectness and ambiguity, while others emphasize directness and confrontation (Lustig & Koester, 1999).*

### ***Direct and Indirect Speech***

Another instance of cross-cultural difference that sometimes causes tremendous misunderstanding among people is the varying degrees of directness in interpersonal communication. Some cultures embrace indirectness and ambiguity, while others emphasize directness and confrontation (Lustig & Koester, 1999). In the United States, the norm is to be direct, whether this makes someone else uncomfortable or not. In fact, many Americans from the dominant culture would think it disingenuous to communicate any other way. However, this valued style of communication is in distinct contrast to what Mexican Americans or Micronesians, for example, have learned. People from those cultures are likely to go out of their way to avoid confronting someone with negative information. They might go to a relative and hope that the message gets around to the target person. From their perspective, everyone can save face through the indirect communication of a complaint. An European American might be befuddled or annoyed and ask, “Why didn’t they tell me directly if they have a problem with something that I have done?” (Lustig & Koester, 1999, p. 93). It isn’t hard to see why misunderstandings arise among students or between teachers and students who have been socialized to two such different communication norms. When confronted directly with a criticism or correction, especially in front of others, a student from a culture that privileges indirect communication might feel far more embarrassed than his or her teacher realizes.

## VIGNETTE: Communicating Bad News

*I was visiting an island in the Pacific whose indigenous culture has remained relatively intact despite incursions by Europeans and Americans over the past centuries. As a speaker at an educational conference, I was thrilled to have several days to meet educators from this island, and many others throughout Micronesia, and learn from them how they taught in culturally relevant ways. Of course, I wanted to send post cards of this lovely island to family and friends; I sneaked away to the post office one afternoon to buy some beautiful stamps depicting local arts. I stood in line for nearly half an hour, along with perhaps 20 locals, tourists, and conference guests. As I neared the counter and the lone postal clerk, I heard murmurings to the effect that there might not be any stamps. The Arizona tourist ahead of me turned around and announced in tones that everyone could hear, "They are out of stamps, and there won't be any until three o'clock this afternoon when the plane from Hawaii arrives!"*

### DISCUSSION

- **If you had been behind the writer in line, how do you think you would have felt when the Arizona tourist made the announcement?**
- **Have you ever been in a situation like this one? If so, which of the people mentioned in the scene did you behave most like?**
- **Can you think of an instance in which some of your students have spoken more or less directly than you would have in their situation?**

There are, of course, many other revealing examples of cross-cultural variations in language use. Any diverse classroom may represent a mixture of cultures, each with its own beliefs about how children should communicate. Some cultural groups emphasize listening over speaking and believe that wisdom entails speaking very selectively (Philips, 1972). Other groups (such as the dominant U.S. culture) believe that power and knowledge come through active use of language in social situations (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000). Some groups use language with children primarily to socialize them to expected behaviors. Others attempt to get small children to talk about what they observe or experience in ways that are similar to how language is used in schools (Snow, 1983). Some cultures may believe that children should speak one at a time (as is common practice in U.S. classrooms), while others believe children may speak at the same time (Au & Jordan, 1981). Some cultures believe that questioning an adult is a sign of critical thinking (as in U.S. dominant culture), while others believe that questioning an adult is a sign of poor upbringing and lack of respect (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997; Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1996). Understandably, these differences can have a profound effect on how comfortable a child feels within the language practices of his or her classroom. Teachers will be in a much better position to get children to participate in classroom talk if they understand how talk takes place in their students' homes. If children have not been expected to use language in "school" ways at home, they will need time to learn those ways. Teaching new ways of using language need not result in a devaluation of children's own ways with words.

*Cultural differences in styles of expression and communication can affect parental involvement in schooling as well as student behavior.*

Cultural differences in styles of expression and communication can affect parental involvement in schooling as well as student behavior. Schools today often expect parents to participate in parent-teacher conferences and, at times, on committees that set educational policy or support the school in other ways. The intent behind these expectations is positive: schools want to foster participation and empowerment of parents. They want schooling to reflect parents' priorities and for parents to have an investment in their children's education. However, because of the special esteem accorded teachers in many other cultures, members of those cultures may believe that decisions about practices and policies should be left to professionals. Parents holding these cultural values are puzzled when a school tries to involve them in goal setting at parent-teacher conferences and decision

making on advisory councils. Teachers, on the other hand, may think such parents are uncaring or unconcerned about their children's education. If the parents speak little or no English and the teacher cannot speak the parents' language, communication problems are compounded. However, it is more often the values and intentions underlying the language—rather than the language difference itself—that cause misunderstandings between home and school (Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Quiroz, 2001).

In the vignette below, one teacher bridges the gap between the cultures of her students—who are mostly Latino immigrants—and the culture of school, with its requirements for a very particular kind of discourse.

## VIGNETTE: The Field Trip

*Ms. Altcheck's fourth-grade class was preparing to take a field trip to the Ballona Wetlands Park near their Los Angeles school. They were lucky enough to have a wildlife docent from the park come to their classroom twice before the trip. When he asked the students what they knew about various animals they would likely see on the trip, they routinely answered with stories about animal experiences with their families. On the second visit, he let a couple of stories go by and then issued the admonition, "No more stories!" Ms. Altcheck knew that what he wanted was a "scientific discussion" with no "extraneous" commentary. She wasn't surprised, though, when his next question was met with silence. Why? Her students are largely from immigrant Latino families, and their cultures do not always stress the separation of content knowledge from social experience.*

*Later, Ms. Altcheck invited her students to tell their stories that related in some way to the planned field trip. As they talked, she constructed a T-chart on the board with key elements from the students' stories on the left. Then, she asked them to help her extract the "scientific information" from their stories. For example, she used a student's comment that "the hummingbird's*

wings moved so fast” to draw out information about the bird’s metabolism and feeding habits. The students were participating, and the science lesson was taught in a culturally responsive way.

## DISCUSSION

*The classroom extension below shows a reconstruction of the T-chart Ms. Altchech and her students developed. Through her instructional strategy, Ms. Altchech helped students move from a familiar discourse style to the more academic style expected in the classroom. She used their own strengths and values (including a strong orientation to family) to shape the instruction. She allowed students to relate their stories—stories that often involved trips or other family activities. The result was a high level of student engagement, ready identification of students’ prior knowledge, and a joint construction of the “scientific knowledge” that was the goal of the lesson.*

### FIGURE 1

#### Classroom Extension

STUDENT EXPERIENCE	SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
<p><b>Carolina’s Story</b></p> <p>I was playing in the garden with grandmother and I saw a hummingbird near the cherry tree.</p> <p>The bird “stood in the air.” I tried to go close to the pretty little bird, but it kept darting away.</p>	<p><b>Hummingbird</b></p> <p>Brownish with bright iridescent green and red coloring around head and neck</p> <p>Wings beat rapidly</p> <p>Bird can hover and fly in any direction</p> <p>Has to eat frequently because it uses so much energy in its movements</p>

## ***Language Attitudes***

Attitudes toward language influence our perceptions about other people's social identities, social status (Fishman, 1991), and intellectual abilities (Ramirez, 1985). All speakers use one or more dialects of the language they speak. Regional dialects have traditionally symbolized allegiance to a region, conveyed positive and shared connotations associated with valued traits, and signaled social bonding within class and ethnic groups. Accents and dialectal variations, however, have also had negative connotations, and in many societies they are impediments to social, educational, and economic opportunities.

Attitudes and values attached to some facets of language (e.g., regional or national accent) are evident and widely acknowledged. These are often captured in humor and parodies. However, people are rarely aware of the depth of reactions to divergent language styles and the speakers who use them. "The ideal of linguistic democracy, in which the speech of every citizen is regarded with equal respect by all others, is perhaps the most unrealistic of all social ideals. Speech is one of the most effective instruments in existence for maintaining a given social order" (Christian, cited in Peñalosa, 1980, p. 183).

In general, those who achieve the highest degree of economic success in U.S. society tend to have the least regionally-accented speech (see Peñalosa, 1980). The significance of this reality has not gone unnoticed among speakers of different varieties of English. Few television newscasters, for example, speak with a distinctive accent, and some have consciously eliminated certain regional characteristics from their speech.

Language attitudes – both positive and negative – also operate within the classroom and can affect the teaching and learning process. Language plays a major role in establishing the social identities and relationships of teachers and students in the classroom. As Ramirez (1985) has observed, the initial impressions teachers form about students are often based upon features of their speech. Once established, these views appear to remain relatively fixed and may influence teachers' expectations of students. Moreover, negative teacher attitudes may reinforce similar student attitudes toward their own or others' nonstandard language use. Thus, students may be subjected to teacher, peer, and internalized prejudice because of the dialect they speak (Hall & Guthrie, 1981).

*Attitudes toward language influence our perceptions about other people's social identities, social status, and intellectual abilities.*

## Language Varieties: Dialects, Pidgins, and Creoles

### Dialects

*A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.*

Max Weinreich (quoted in Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 399)

As the above quotation suggests, the line between what counts as a language and what counts as a dialect can be a fuzzy one. Linguists often refer to a dialect as a variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. Pace of speech, volume, and other nonlinguistic behaviors—such as how close one stands to a conversational partner—are also likely to vary. Discourse conventions may be different in a dialect—for instance, conventions that govern the structure and narration of stories, the rules of conversation, and the uses for written language. In fact, the traditional definition of dialects holds that they are mutually intelligible versions of the same language. For example, despite variations in pronunciation or usage, a speaker of Southern U.S. English can generally understand a speaker from the Northwest. However, in the case of Chinese, different varieties, such as Mandarin and Cantonese, are usually considered to be dialects even though they are not mutually intelligible in spoken form. (The fact that they use the same characters means that they *are* mutually intelligible

in written form.) And while Swedish and Norwegian are mutually intelligible, they are treated as separate languages for sociopolitical reasons. So, the common definition of dialect has numerous exceptions; for that reason, we refer to a particular language or dialect as a “language variety.” We use the term language variety, then, to cover any form of a language, whether a geographical or social dialect, a patois, a Creole, or some other code of a language. Most speakers of a language use a variety that differs in recognizable ways from the so-called “standard” form; none of these varieties is in any sense inherently inferior to the standard variety in grammar, accent,



or phonology. At the same time, these sociocultural and geographical variations within a language signal matters of great importance to those who use them. Varieties serve valuable group identity functions for their speakers; they express interests that are closely linked to matters of self-respect and other psychological attributes.

Varieties may be distinguished by their use by a particular group of speakers who are separated from others geographically or socially. For example, in the United States, we might distinguish at least the following regional dialects: Southern, Mid-Atlantic, New England, New York City, Midwestern, Southwestern, Appalachian, and Northwestern. There are other dialects representing smaller numbers of speakers within these regions. In Pennsylvania, for example, Pennsylvania Dutch speakers speak a dialect influenced by German. Hawaii has its own variety (Hawaiian Creole English), and Alaska has many varieties of English among the communities of Alaskan Native peoples. An example of a language variety that is based on social group rather than region is African American Vernacular English. We explore this more fully below.

Teachers need a basic understanding of what a dialect is—that it represents a functioning, rule-governed language system not a substandard language in any linguistic sense. There is a tendency for people to confuse the social status attached to a dialect with its linguistic adequacy or value, but this is a mistake that teachers need to avoid. Otherwise, teachers may make false judgments about students' language skills or intelligence. In fact, sophisticated language skills are needed to master any variety (Rickford, 1998). Although teachers do not routinely get the opportunity to learn about language structures and usage the way linguists do, they need to become linguists of a sort to understand how language comes into the learning process. In particular, they need to understand what constitutes a language deficit versus a language difference. “A child doesn't need to know any linguistics in order to use language to learn; but a teacher needs to know some linguistics ... to understand how the process takes place—or what is going wrong when it doesn't” (Halliday cited in Farr & Trumbull, 1997, p. 11).

*There is a tendency for people to confuse the social status attached to a dialect with its linguistic adequacy or value, but this is a mistake that teachers need to avoid.*

## ACTIVITY: Exploring Language Variation

- *Think of an instance when you received a phone call from someone who used language in a way that was different from your own use. What questions did his or her language use raise for you? Have you ever noticed a difference in language use over the phone and later met the person? Have assumptions based on their language use been confirmed or contradicted in person?*
- *Have you ever encountered someone in a group setting, noted their ways of using language, and then had an opportunity to work with them beyond that original group setting? Did your perception of them change when you saw how they used language differently in a different social setting?*
- *Have you ever found yourself adopting a dialect or local language variation to fit in with the conversation of others? Have you ever been made aware that you were doing so unconsciously? How does it feel to speak like others do or to speak differently from those in a given social setting?*

While most of us recognize that learning a new language presents challenges, we may not realize that for some children learning a new language variety is one of the most daunting tasks they face in school. There are rarely programs or practices in place to help these children with this task. In addition, their teachers may not understand that their students' home languages are perfectly systematic, logical systems. They may hear these as merely deviations from "Standard English" and strive to override them with corrections. So called "Standard English" is simply one form among many equally valid and complex varieties of English. What is grammatical to a person depends on what dialect(s) he or she has learned (Crystal, 1987).

As with languages, many people do master more than one language or language variety, and it is not necessary to get rid of one to learn another. Because our schools focus so intensely on helping English language learners master English or helping nondominant speakers master the standard form, we often forget that children have already mastered complex linguistic systems that will continue to be meaningful and useful in their personal lives.

Language varieties come into the work of the school in one way or another. Children may have two or more varieties that they use in their everyday communication—one used at home, another in the peer group, and a third at school. Largely because of the school's influence, this last one may come to be very close to the standard variety. At the same time, many children arrive in schools with little or no contact with the "standard" form that is used as the language of formal education. Often these children are penalized (socially and instructionally) for speaking a variety that is accorded low status in the school. Some language varieties that have routinely been disparaged include Appalachian, Southern, and African American Vernacular English.

Decisions about whether to require students to speak and write the standard variety in school are fraught with controversy. Insistence on Standard English may add a layer of demands that make acquisition of other skills more difficult for students. In addition, students who choose to use Standard English must often confront peer pressure and accept corrections they may interpret as



*If Standard English is to be required, students need to understand the value and purpose of learning it in terms that are meaningful to them.*

insulting to their own speech patterns and identities. However, if students do not learn Standard English, their life opportunities may be limited (Christian, 1987). If Standard English is to be required, students need to understand the value and purpose of learning it in terms that are meaningful to them (Christian, 1987). Nevertheless, students may still be faced with a dilemma. As Chaika (1982) observes, the speech of children and adolescents resembles that of the people with whom they identify. Because language is an integral part of identity, students may feel conflicted adopting a new variety not spoken by family or community members with whom they identify.

Sociodrama is a technique that has been reported to help students develop proficiency in Standard English appropriate to various situations, without relying on excessive use of grammar and pronunciation exercises (Chaika, 1982). In a typical sociodrama exercise, students are

asked to assume roles and act out situations in which they would be using standard forms of the language (e.g., interviewing for a job, complaining to someone in authority, and speaking in a style suitable for the assigned role). A similar technique can be applied to writing (e.g., newspaper articles) and used in combination with group work and peer editing. The role-playing context acknowledges that choices can be made about when to use a particular language variety. In this way, students do not get the message that only one variety is legitimate.

With greater understanding of the issues surrounding dialects, teachers are more likely to respect and value students' language and to seek strategies that help students become bidialectal, if that is the goal agreed upon by the school and the community. There is no educational or linguistic reason a student should not maintain use of his or her home language while acquiring additional varieties.

## CASE STUDY: African American Vernacular English (Black Language)

Many African American children speak what has been called variously “African-American Vernacular English,” “Black English Vernacular,” “Black Language,” or “U.S. Ebonics” (Perry & Delpit, 1998). This variety, like all other natural linguistic systems, is rule-governed and capable of serving all of the intellectual and social needs of its speakers. Black Language has multiple forms—oral and written, formal and informal, vernacular and literary (Perry, 1998). Its forms and ways of being used have been influenced by West African and Niger-Congo languages (O’Neil, 1998; Smith, 1998), as well as by the social circumstances surrounding the histories of African Americans in the United States. For example, deletion of the final consonant in a consonant cluster (wes’ for west or col’ for cold) brings English words more in line with the form of words in some West African languages (Smith, 1998). In addition, words and phrases have been coined in order to keep some things private from the dominant white culture (particularly during the time of slavery). The oratorical devices (e.g., rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, repetition) used by African American preachers are distinctive elements of Black Language as well (Perry, 1998). In fact, many other discourse conventions distinguish Black Language, including particular structures for storytelling or narrative writing (Ball, 1997; Heath, 1983; Michaels & Cazden, 1986).

Black Language is strongly valued by many African Americans as a symbol of intimacy and solidarity—it represents “intergroup distinctiveness from the white community” (Beebe, 1988, p. 65). Differences between Black Language and Standard English are constantly reinforced and apparently increasing. One reason is that students who do not identify with speakers of Standard English are not likely to emulate their speech patterns.

As with children whose storytelling and conversational styles differ from those of the





dominant U.S. culture, with speakers of Black Language, teachers need not negate the value of Black Language in order to introduce new language skills. Carrie Secret—an Oakland, Calif. teacher—encourages her elementary students to use English (or Standard English) when they are writing, but she also acknowledges the value of their language (which she calls Ebonics):

We read literature that has Ebonics language patterns in it. For example, last year in fifth grade we read Joyce Hansen's *Yellow Bird and Me* and in fourth grade we read her book *The Gift Giver*. The language was Ebonic in structure. The language was the bonding agent for students. The book just felt good to them. (Secret, 1998, p. 81)

**Figure 2** on page 22 outlines some of the issues involved in teaching students who speak Black English and suggests some strategies for addressing them.

**FIGURE 2****Black English—Dialect Issues in Instruction**

<b>POSSIBLE DIALECT CONFLICTS</b>	<b>POSSIBLE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES</b>
Students omit final consonants or consonants in clusters.	Draw attention to the contrast between students' pronunciation and spelling and Standard English spelling. Generate a list of words with a similar pattern (e.g., cold, bold, mold, fold, hold). Note: This does not require correcting pronunciation but simply pointing out the differences and choices.
Students use complex verb patterns that differ from what Standard English employs (e.g., "He be going..." to indicate a habitual behavior).	Have the class or a small group brainstorm about alternative ways to get across the same meaning. (He often goes..., He usually goes..., He has a habit of going). Have students choose the best forms for their intended meanings. Discuss when Black English or Standard English would be more appropriate or expressive.
Students omit the copula (the verb "to be") or the "'s" possessive in places Standard English would use it. (e.g., "She thrilled about her brother good luck" vs. "She is thrilled about her brother's good luck.")	Again, using Carrie Secret's strategy, help students make explicit the differences between the two dialects and make conscious choices about when to use either one.
Students use Black Language style in a situation where Standard English would be more socially effective (e.g., writing a request for information to a public agency, preparing to give a plea to the school board for additional resources for a special program).	Use sociodrama to have students take on different roles, highlighting how one would communicate effectively in different situations. Sometimes Black Language will be more effective and sometimes Standard English will be; identify which applies where.
Students use rhetorical features in writing that are considered "oral" strategies from the dominant dialect's point of view (e.g., repetition of phrases or themes).	Have students read their writing aloud and discuss whether or how this is effective to their purpose in writing. The student's strategy could be powerfully effective depending on his or her intended audience.

While Black Language provides an important example of student dialect and how teachers might respond to it, teachers need to learn about the norms of whatever varieties their students speak. Appalachian, for example, is spoken by many families; research suggests that students who speak it, like students who speak Black English, often encounter misunderstandings and misjudgments about their abilities (see, for example, Heath, 1983).

### **pidgin**

A simplified language that has developed as the means of communication between speakers of two or more languages who do not know each other's languages.

## **Pidgins and Creoles**

A *pidgin* is a simplified language that has developed as the means of communication between speakers of two or more languages who do not know each other's languages. The word itself is thought to have come from the word "business" as pronounced by Chinese speakers trading with English speakers. Pidgins retain important content words (nouns and verbs) and usually maintain the basic word order of the target language (e.g., subject-verb-object in a pidgin version of English) but eliminate the small grammatical words (prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and some pronouns). Tense may be indicated by context or words like "before," "after," or "by and by." Number is usually implied in the context. So, for example, a person might say, "Farmer sell vegetable bymby (by and by)," to mean, "The farmers will soon be selling their vegetables."

When a pidgin becomes a speaker's first language through intergenerational mother tongue transmission, it is called a *Creole*. A Creole generally derives from a pidgin. Once it is acquired as a true language of primary communication, a Creole begins to become more complex than its parent language. Additional grammatical features are added, such as verb tenses, prepositions, conjunctions, plural markers, and articles—if those exist in the language that forms the basis of the pidgin or Creole (Crystal, 1987; Carr, 1972). A Creole is a fully functional system with the creativity of any natural language. Whether or not the Creole has the social status of the "preferred," high-status variety, it is an adequate language variety that requires the same linguistic skills any other language requires.

### **Creole**

When a pidgin becomes a speaker's first language through intergenerational mother tongue transmission.

An excellent example of the Creolization process is the movement from pidgin English to Hawaiian English Creole in the last century. There is evidence that a Hawaiian pidgin was the original pidgin produced in the early 1800s after the influx of English-speaking traders. Its use continued until around 1890, after the immigration of speakers of many other languages. This pidgin, as its name implies, was based not on English but on Hawaiian (Roberts, 1995). Although commonly called “pidgin” by Hawaiian citizens, the present-day vernacular language is a Creole—a form of English influenced by Hawaiian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and at least two Filipino varieties. There may be a small number of speakers of true pidgin English; Carr (1972) suggests that there were still some in isolated areas as late as 1972. Many Hawaiian speakers move back and forth between Creole and the more standard form of English. As we have observed, language use is contextual, and speakers choose the variety that fits whatever context they are in.

Understanding the nuances of student language is essential to all good teaching. Language affects all aspects of schooling—how students participate in classroom discourse, how they develop their skills as independent learners, and how they demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. In the following sections, we discuss at greater length three key elements of how language affects schooling—second language learning, language and literacy, and language and assessment. These are only some of the significant arenas in which awareness of the role of language in the classroom pays off. Nevertheless, understanding the role of language in these arenas will provide educators with some insight into the rich potential for teaching effectively by keeping the influence of language in mind.