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Skooz be Hat'in: My Story Navigating and Negotiating Standard American English

Lisa M. Westbrooks¹

In most education systems, African American Vernacular English is not considered a language or variety of English and students who speak it are coerced into using Standard American English only. Using autoethnographic methodology I examine my personal language navigation and negotiation of Standard American English and the oppression of language and identity that accompanied it. I use storytelling to draw the reader into my childhood memories and the drifting away of my first language. As a young student and English as a Second Language teacher I have learned from these experiences and share strategies so that others may successfully reduce language oppression.

Ma gran'dadee kood visit' da pas' an' spin' uh goad'n yawn wit hiz tung a'da same time!

My grandfather could visit the past and spin a golden yarn with his tongue at the same time!

Magic! True! Own sum daz ma sista' an' I wood sit in hiz gran' ol' lap whi' he spun'a tale afta'

Magic! True! On some days my sister and I would sit on his grand old lap as he spun tale after

tale of da trouble hiz brotha's, cuzins an 'em wood git'in. Dees goad'n ol' tales wern't reguluh

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tale of the mischief he, his brothers, and cousins would get into. These golden old tales were not your regular storee book tales; Dey wuz gen-u'wine life storees 'bout da worl he use'ta live in win he wuz story book tales; they were life stories—authentic happenings about the world he lived in as a lil' ol' biddy boi. Uh lot'a timz ma gran'dadee wood'a make a ho' bunch'a noiz, a jump'n a small boy. Many times my grandfather would make loud noises, animated aroun' an laf an laf'in win he tol dees tales in da pas. Som'a da time he wood'a tell'a gestures, and laugh and laugh as he spun the tales as he visited the past. Every now and again he would spin a funny lil' ol' storee mix'n up da' South Carolina red clay, Jim Crow laws, an da' KKK's men funny tale intertwining the South Carolina red clay, Jim Crow Laws, and Ku Klux Klan's men a noki'n a'da doe. You might be scar'd lis'a nin to deese stor'as, but not me, I lik't to hear da knocking on his family's door. This may seem frightening to most children, but I wanted to hear them all. Yes, truf! An'a truf can be a lil' scary. truth can be a little scary.

Like a griot (historian) from West Africa, my American born grandfather was and is an oral storyteller. His stories may appear superficial, but they were deeply meaningful. They were packed with cultural, social, and political lived experiences of current events of his time. Stories are important. It is through storytelling that we learn about our history, our triumphs, and mistakes. More importantly, when we reflect on these stories often we can find a complex lesson that can be helpful to us and to the community that we live in.

Stories educate us. English teachers teach narratives, autobiographies, and memoirs to their students because there is something important to learn. Susan Florio-Ruane teaches self-narratives written by ethnic minorities so that her predominately White middle class students gain new cultural awareness and are able to examine their own cultural perspectives (Chang, 2008). If we work on ourselves, maybe we can help others with similar trials and troubles of their own.

I have been inspired by the griots, my grandfather, and numerous educators and scholars. These wise men and women selflessly and generously gifted their stories to the world. They have the magical ability to captivate their audience with the truths that they hold. In this reflective essay, I share a personal story about language oppression during my middle school and high school years and weave theoretical concepts throughout it. During my school years my language was assassinated. Language is a major part of our identity and culture; language is who we are. I share my struggles, trials, tribulations, and triumphs in my language development in school and interactions with others. As an English as a Second Language teacher I know that my students have similar negative language experiences. My goal is to reflect and examine my missed education opportunities and language oppression from the perspective of an African American woman teacher-researcher who used to speak African American Vernacular (AAVE)—also known as AAL (African American Language), BAE (Black American English), and Ebonics (Smitherman & Baugh, 2002).

I admit that I do not have a permanent solution to prevent language oppression. But there is research and strategies that can be used in the classroom to reduce implications of language oppression. At the least I hope this story invites an honest conversation about language oppression in our education system.

Autoethnography and Discourse

In this exploration of language, I use autoethnography as a research method. Autoethnography is a hybrid qualitative research method that has roots in anthropology, sociology, humanities, autobiography, literature, and many more art forms (e.g., narratives and poetry) (Chang, 2008; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Most simply, it is a blend of autobiography and ethnography studies. Auto is the study of self and ethnography the study of the social and political aspects of culture in a natural space. Chang (2008)

contends that autoethnography should address three orientations: ethnographic methodology, culture interpretation, and autobiographical content.

An autoethnographic approach allows the researcher to articulate a significant phenomenon in a creative way. The researcher is freed from constraint of the expected traditional conventions of writing: “One’s unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations, from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored” (Chang, 2008, p. 52). Freedom is necessary to share this study affectively.

Autoethnographic research is a qualitative research method that helps us delve deeper into personal experiences that are significant to make connections to our social, cultural, and political worlds. This autoethnographic study is my chance to examine past experiences and reflect on missed educational circumstances and language oppression due to my cultural language. This will not be only about my experience, but equivocally about me (the writer) and my community. As Chang (2008) notes, “Self-discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others” (p. 34).

In this essay I use my personal language development experience in rural Michigan and intimate insights of my Discourse as data. Gee (2012) explains:

A Discourse with a capital “D” is composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing with other people and with various objects and tools, and high technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable activities. (p. 152)

Understanding that each of us has our own Discourse is imperative. As an educator, I have been exposed to many Discourses and I respect and appreciate our differences. I recognize that Discourse affects how I perceive other cultures and I am careful not to make assumptions, judgments, or stereotypes. Even so, I use my own Discourse as data in service of examining the impact of oppressive language practices.

In this essay I draw readers' attention into one insider's perspective of the Ebonics movement and language oppression that occurs in education. According to Gregory and Ruby (2011) an insider is someone who shares the same background and culture. The insider's perspective that I share from is from an African American woman teacher-researcher whose African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been eliminated and replaced with Standard American English (SAE) not by choice. I begin with an overview of AAVE, then share my story, self-revelations, and strategies I now use as a teacher in my classroom.

African American Vernacular English

In 1996 the Oakland, California school board unanimously approved the Ebonics resolution. Perry (1998) notes that, "Essentially, this resolution maintained that Black Ebonics was a legitimate language, rule based, systematic, and that this language was the primary language of children enrolled in the Oakland school system" (p. 3). The Oakland School system argued that Black Language should not be viewed as a language with flaws, but should be accepted as a legitimate language and used as a scaffold to assist students in acquiring Standard English (Perry, 1998). This argument is much like the bilingual bicultural education model, which demonstrates that a student can be bi-literate and bicultural without losing their native identity or having to choose one culture over the other (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

Seventeen years earlier was the Ann Arbor, Michigan Black Language case. Baugh and Smitherman (2002) explain that ambitious African American mothers rallied together to seek justice for their children who allegedly were not receiving a fair chance at education at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary—parents sued the Ann Arbor school district for not teaching their children how to read. The mothers argued that the educational system had failed them because teachers did not take the children's unique cultural and linguistic background into consideration (Smitherman & Baugh, 2002).

These two cases are critically significant and especially valuable stories for teachers, schools, and governing education departments to learn from. The Ann Arbor case is nearly 40 years old and many education systems still hold to the English only policy. If we continue to allow oppressive behavior our marginalized students will continue to struggle to achieve archaic school standards. Even today, it is common for school systems to use a subtractive schooling learning model. Valenzuela (1999) contends that many schools subtract heritage from Mexican immigrant students. Heritage is subtracted from the students by way of disparaging and discounting the richness that their ethnicity brings to the classroom including language. I argue that it happens to African American students as well.

Teachers are in a position in which they are the only resource of knowledge (Freire, 1970/1993). Ultimately, students are not given the opportunity to use their cultural capital (e.g., family, language, or social knowledge) in the classroom (Nash, 1990). Freire calls this the banking system—when teachers deposit knowledge into the students (1970/1993). Clearly, traditional American schooling has an oppressive history; it was created to specifically exclude persons of color (Ladson-Billings, 2009). African American history shows us that during the time of American slavery, one of the tools of oppression was to not allow slaves to be educated. In the mid to late 1800s after emancipation some states had anti-literacy laws. Later, segregated schools were developed with limited resources and materials, which is not unlike the situations many predominantly non-white schools face now. Research shows that the American educational cultural model primarily accommodates the dominant society established on white supremacy notions (Delpit, 2006; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Gee, 2012; Kinloch, 2005; Kirkland, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The three Rs (readi'n, riti'n and 'rithmetic) are the basic structure of all schools, and the use of the Standard English language is a major tool used to oppress those who do not speak it.

The majority of public schools in the United States now have an English-only language policy (Leeman, Rabin, & Roman-Mendoza, 2011). There are many educators who do not support students' home

language and identity. The main goal for language learners *should* be to help them to preserve their identity and culture while adding a new language and a broader perspective. Ignoring language and identity can result in language loss and is damaging to students' psychological welfare.

Identity, Language Status, and Solidarity

I remember as if it were just the other day: in 1976 my mother and her boyfriend packed up my half sister, half brother, my soon to be step siblings and I. We were stripped from the riches of our working class neighborhood on the west side of Detroit, Michigan and reassembled 215 miles away to southwest Michigan. Our family was sandwiched between two major urban cities (Detroit and Chicago, Illinois). Our new home was near Kalamazoo, Michigan and a year and a half later just outside of Battle Creek, Michigan. This rural countryside would be my home until age 18. Rural countryside is not an exaggeration—five or six houses on a road, no sidewalks or street lights. Seriously, this was the country, a big red barn with cows, pigs, horses, goats, chickens, and a chicken coop. At age nine I did not know that this rural place would be the beginning of my new language acquisition. I did not know that a washing away of my African American tongue would occur in a coerced exchange for SAE. Nor did I know that this move would be a foreshadowing of the feeling that I would have in years to come: cautious uncertainty. A captive between the two cities, trapped in between the African American culture that I rightly inherited and the White community that barely tolerated my blackness. Since my rural upbringing I have always felt that I could never be an authentic member of either culture White or Black. Language achieves status and solidarity. How we speak, what we say, and when we say it can exhibit respect, dignity, and social distance (Gee, 2012). Language is personal; it identifies a culture and who we are as individuals (Delpit & Kilgour Dowdy, 2002; Spolsky, 1998). The way that we speak and who we are cannot be separated.

My introduction to SAE was brutal. My African American language was somehow offensive. Peers or teachers never validated my language. Instead, I was urged to suppress my voice. I was not called on

when my hand was raised or called on when it appeared I did not know the answer. I was taunted, teased, and consistently received harsh criticism from my new peers and teachers for speaking poor English. I had no help, no savior, or advocate to prepare me or my teachers and peers to ease me gently into rural White society. There was no one available to go to the school board on my behalf and explain that there was nothing wrong with my home language.

Students have the right to speak their home languages at school. According to AAVE scholars, language is not hierarchical (Perry, 1998; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman & Baugh, 2002; Spolsky, 1998). Society largely considers SAE a dominant language; it does not mean that AAVE is inferior. But this type of thinking was used to silence me. I was robbed of the language that I spoke. Maybe the community that I now lived in had a subtractive schooling, English-only agenda, a way to oppress ethnic minorities. For years there have been a substantial amount of supporters for English-only policies. This same group has fought against bilingual ballots, zero population growth, and limited immigration (Nunberg, 1999).

Unfortunately, these attitudes were a culminating factor in my language transition. For many years AAVE has been a much-debated topic and has not received the recognition or validation of being a justifiable language or English language variety. According to Delpit and Kilgour Dowdy (2002), linguist James Albert Harrison claimed in 1884 that Negro English (AAVE) was a language oddity. Harrison described AAVE as exotic, baby talk, and contrived from antiquated English (Delpit & Kilgour Dowdy, 2002). Painfully, I was on the receiving end of these language attitudes, which have become inherent in White society.

My sixth grade year was horrible. I fought almost daily because I was called nigger at least once a day. I distinctly remember my first day at a new school. Our school was approximately forty-five minutes away from our farmhouse. We had to ride a big yellow bus to get there. The bus slowed down in front of our house. As my stepbrother, stepsister, and I boarded the bus the kids slid and glued themselves towards the

aisle sides of their seats, so that we could not sit down. After a few moments went by the bus driver finally yelled, "Sa'lide ova' and led'em sit down." The kids on the bus snickered, they moved over, and we all took a seat. One may wonder how can you achieve solidarity when you live so far away in physical, cultural, and linguistic distance?

As I sat down on the corner of the bus' seat, as comfortably as I could, one of the boys who sat across the aisle from me yelled "Nigger"! I responded, "Yo mama's 'uh nigga." The boy let out a snort and a cunning laugh. He mocked my language and me. He repeated to everyone within earshot what I had said, imitating my AAVE, "Your mama's a nigger." He actually thought it was funny. He obviously did not know how to play the dozens. The dozens is a linguistic showdown, a battle of verbal offenses. It is when two people spat yo mama insults back and forth in an attempt to outperform or embarrass the other (e.g., Yo mama's so black... when she smile at night we cain't see nutin', but her teef light up da' ho' sky) (Green, 2002; Smitherman, 2000). This is when I realized that the White culture was extremely different from my own culture. The White culture clearly had no respect for their mothers if the boy thought that what I said about his mama was a simple joke. Undoubtedly, we clearly spoke two entirely different languages.

The term *mother tongue* has an association with one's native language (Delpit & Kilgour Dowdy, 2002). To criticize someone's way of communication is a direct criticism towards the person's mother. In the African American community, speaking ill of someone's mother is an abomination, we (African Americans) just don't do that. Therefore, such an insult in the African American community would have led to harsher insults or a fistfight. The boy's continuous laughing at and mocking my language was a highly unusual response in the African American community. As an African American child, I thought the boy and I should have been cappin' (disrespecting) on each other's mamas or fist fighting (Smitherman, 2000). That did not happen. I felt confused, isolated, and alone because of the language barrier.

Language is our identity; it defines our status. Language establishes bonds between community members and boundaries to keep others out (Spolsky, 1998). We all desire a sense of solidarity (Gee, 2012). Moving to a new school I definitely wanted to develop a sense of solidarity with the other kids. However, I would have a series of events to keep me in the position bound on the outside. I was an outsider.

Narrators, Actors, and Being Cast Out

The small rural elementary school just outside of Kalamazoo, Michigan was a sharp contrast from my urban elementary in Detroit, Michigan. My urban school fostered a multitude of children of many different colors, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages. According to my memory, we were all treated the same. In juxtaposition, I did not blend into the rural elementary with my White classmates. In my first few days of arrival to the school I recall initially being placed in the highest reading group. However, a few weeks later, apparently I was not performing to the teacher's expectations. Often teachers are narrators: they guide the narratives of children, and they are the one and only voice that dictates what happens in a classroom. Teachers talk, students listen and repeat (Freire, 1970/1993). If the scene does not play out accordingly, the actor (the student) gets cut from the play. Once, in front of the entire class, the teacher told me that if I did not keep up that she would move me to the lowest reading group. I remember biting the inside of my cheek so that I would not cry in front of everyone. I refused to be humiliated twice: once by my teacher and secondly by my lack of self-control of my tears.

After being embarrassed in front of the entire fourth grade class who would want to keep up? I remember making a conscious decision not try as much in school, because my effort seemed to not matter to my teacher. Once again in the teacher's eyes I was unsuccessful on an assignment. The teacher again made an announcement to the class: "Lisa will now be joining the lowest reading group." Was it a surprise to this community that an urban Black child could read as well as her White classmates? Unfortunately, my

budding intelligence was attacked in many more ways. This was my introduction to subtractive learning and the banking system. Instead of giving me the opportunity to bring in my own knowledge I was stripped of my cultural capital. Often my teachers presented themselves as being omniscient. In this role, they were the main authority that poured knowledge into me.

Before out of the fourth grade I received another academic blow that shattered my confidence as a teachable human being. Feeling picked on again by the teacher I was called to the chalkboard to solve a long division problem. As an obedient child I took the long way up to the board, knowing with each step that I had no clue of what I was in for. I was hoping and wishing with each motion towards the board that maybe this time I would get it correct. Before I reached for the chalk I prayed a silent prayer that whatever problem posed to me I could miraculously solve it. Just as I suspected, I already knew I failed the task before I ever attempted to solve the problem. The teacher dictated the problem and I wrote it on the board backwards. This was long division, so I wrote the dividend to the left of the divisor. The students erupted in laughter and some even heckled me. I attempted to leave the board, but my teacher had me stay as she scolded me for not listening. In my understanding I did what she asked me to do. She said, "forty-two divided by seven" and I wrote on the board in just that order. As she corrected me she turned beet-red with anger. From that day forward I felt I could not learn and that there was something seriously wrong with me. This experience permanently cemented my decision not to try to learn. The teacher and students' reaction to my misunderstanding assured me that if I tried to learn I would fail. In the 1970s children were seen and not heard—this is the way of oppression; it silences speakers. It was unheard of for teachers to listen to the students and learn to speak to them as Freire (1970/1993) would suggest. The verbal embarrassments, the silencing of my voice, the language oppression continued for a while.

By high school I was a near fluent SAE speaker. However, my English literature class experience was horrific. I was a new SAE speaker learning a new level of academics and I was not quite prepared for

the rigor of the course. Again, teachers and classmates publically ridiculed me by laughing at the responses I gave when I participated in class. The teacher gave an assignment to complete at home and bring back the next day. She instructed us to go home and think of some proverbs, write them down, and bring them to class. Before class was over she gave us some examples of proverbs. So the next day, we all turned in our homework assignments, and she began to shuffle through the messy stack of papers. One by one she began to read aloud the proverbs that students had discovered and then would affirm that the student had done a good job. Finally, she found my paper in the messy stack and read it aloud. "What goes up must come down," she said with a smirk and a chuckle. My classmates roared with laughter and began to ask each other, "Who do you think wrote that"? The teacher went on to explain, "The person who wrote this did not write a proverb, this is the law of gravity." Majorly embarrassed and ashamed, immediately afterwards I went to the counselor's office and dropped the class in exchange for the remedial reading class for the rest of the fall semester and Basic English class for the winter semester. Many teachers (African American and non-African American) are commonly unfamiliar with the language, reading, and writing of African American students and therefore berate their academic efforts (Gee, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Wheeler, 2008). Clearly, the data stated that I belonged in the class because I passed the test, but the teacher disagreed.

In reflection, I believe there were multiple misunderstandings due to a language barrier between the narrators (my teachers) and myself. Children and adults are capable of identifying speech patterns, categorizing patterns, and using the linguistic information to discriminate (Spolsky 1998; Baugh & Smitherman, 2002). Another consideration is that Black children's learning styles are often different from White children (Delpit, 2006; Perry, 1998; Smitherman & Baugh, 2002). African American children perform better academically with explicit instruction, but White teachers tend to give directions in choices (Delpit, 2006). For example, instead of saying sit down, a White teacher may say, "Would you like to take a seat?"

To some of us the teacher clearly means sit down, but an African American child would assume they have a choice in sitting or not.

Submission to Language Oppression

In middle school as an insecure pre-teen I desperately wanted to blend in. However, my skin and hair would not cooperate. Somehow I submitted to the new language, SAE. The *critical period hypothesis* claims that in order to speak a second language with native-like fluency one must be consistently exposed to the language before the age of puberty (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Ironically, in eighth grade at age thirteen was about the time that I began to surrender to the new language. I was tired of being isolated.

By eighth grade, my school performance was mediocre at best and in some subjects below average, specifically in math courses. My low school performance was because four years prior I decided I would not allow teachers and classmates to ridicule my academic efforts. Unfortunately, many teachers unfamiliar with the rules (grammar) of AAVE generalize that students who speak AAVE have learning disabilities (Perry & Delpit, 1998). This goes back to how historically, scholars used to argue that AAVE exists because Blacks are mentally and physically lazy, intellectually inept, and their physical features do not allow them to speak proper English because of their wide noses and thick lips (Smitherman & Baugh, 2002; Delpit & Kilgour Dowdy, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Conversely, there are many linguists who contend that AAVE is a distinct language from SAE or a variety of SAE (Baugh, 1983; Green 2002; Labov, 1969; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). As a child I did not even know that AAVE was a language or variety of English. All I knew was that my AAVE voice was not considered correct or smart. I was beginning to buy into what teachers and peers thought about my native language.

Later on I discovered that I loved to read and I had a passion for grammar. I recall in eighth grade that no one in English class including myself would ever volunteer to diagram sentences on the chalkboard. However, our English teacher would always call me up. In her act of pushing me, I believe she provoked

me to explore and refine my curiosity of language. I would pretend that I did not want to, but secretly I did. I would begrudgingly walk up to the chalkboard, pick up the chalk, and begin to draw lines and brackets as I smugly recited the relationships of the parts of speech. I correctly identified subjects, predicates, direct objects, and indirect objects. I always knew the answer and desired to diagram the sentences on the chalkboard. My eighth grade teacher began to take an interest in me. She encouraged me to do good work and she complemented me when I was successful. She became a great support to me. A few months before school was out all of the eighth graders had to take standardized placement tests for high school. I did not take the test seriously. Consequently, I performed below grade level. The test results revealed that I needed reading support and therefore I would have to take remedial reading in high school. My English teacher had a talk with me regarding the results and told me that I did not belong in remedial reading. She had a talk with the school counselor and demanded that I be retested. I retested and scored high enough to take English literature. As I reflect I believe that we were both learners and teachers, there was no hierarchy. She believed in me.

I recall being very excited and experiencing some feelings of comfort that finally a teacher accepted me. Unlike any other teacher she protected me and wanted to empower me with knowledge. She was the type of teacher Freire expected teachers to be. She was neither a narrator nor a spectator idly watching me become a failure. This teacher was a re-creator—she wanted me to win.

Cultural-Linguistic Alienation

Eventually, again I was challenged about the way that I spoke. One day in our high school hallway, I was talking to a friend. I do not remember the conversation, but I do remember the correction. I said the word *on* which sounded more like *oin* (as in coin), which was probably a remnant left over from my AAVE. My schoolmate corrected me, “It’s not oin it’s on.” In saying *on* he used the *schwa* sound for the initial sound, so that *on* rhymed with *yawn*. I was humiliated again, but determined that I would never

mispronounce another SAE word again. From that day forward I became very careful about every single syllable that escaped my mouth. Though I was growing in SAE usage I was still being oppressed by peers and teachers. I never wanted to be alienated from a society by the language I spoke ever again. This was a decision of personal choice; I desired to blend in with any society of choice. I never wanted to be judged by any culture or race by how I speak. I merely wanted complete acceptance of the whole me. Language is vital to culture; it is the way that we socialize with others (Gee, 1999; Spolsky, 1998).

When I graduated from high school I found that indeed I would be alienated from society by language again. This time it was under different circumstances, but equally painful. At the end of 1984 I moved back to Detroit excited to be coming back home and to socialize with African Americans (as I was an outsider in the previous community). I was anticipating filling the void left by the quietness of Battle Creek and the experience that came with it. Unquestionably and wholeheartedly, I believed that I would be embraced back into my own culture. I was gravely mistaken. Just like the Whites, the African American community rejected me. Language attitudes again affected my membership to a culture.

The first encounter that I remember was in a department store elevator at a Mall just outside of Detroit. A longtime friend and I were talking while in the elevator. Just as the elevator slowed to a stop on the next floor a young Black woman exited the elevator, but just as she walked out she mocked me, repeating what I had just said using a White British-like voice attempting to imitate me. Linguistic profiling is a strategy that some people use to classify speakers into a specific racial group (Baugh, 2002; Spolsky, 1998). Because I spoke SAE the stranger in the elevator profiled me as acting White. Smith (2002) indicates that in his childhood African Americans who spoke SAE talked proper or seemed to put on airs. Smith also explains that African Americans who use SAE are thought of as annoying, bourgeois, untrustworthy, insincere, and superficial. This experience for me was hurtful because the stranger exiting the elevator rejected me as an African American and grouped me with Whites, at least linguistically. I am

not White. I was not trying to be White. I was being me. So, very likely she stereotyped me using all of Smith's characteristics of an African American who speaks SAE and lumped me into the White person category. Though this incident may seem small to some, but it was a big deal for me to be rejected; it is an example of language oppression from my *own* culture.

There have been many other instances when African Americans have rejected me because of the way that I talk. The elevator incident was mild compared to some others. My own family members have attacked the way that I speak. Some family members have called me stuck up, snob, or sadiddy (AAVE slang for conceited), and White girl. This list includes only a few of the harsh insults that were said to my face. I recall once when at my grandparents' home, I answered their phone. I handed the phone to my grandmother. When she took the call she broke into spontaneous laughter. After she caught her breath, she said "Your aunt thought you were a White girl!" African Americans do not want to be White. Language has been used to oppress my voice, my AAVE voice and my SAE voice.

Self-Revelation: Sold Out

During the writing of this reflective journey I uncovered and relived old memories and interchanges with former teachers and peers. Just as harsh as teachers and peers were, I also received gratification from speaking SAE. This self-revelation causes me to be honest with myself and to you, the reader. From the eighth grade into high school I had succumbed to the English only policy. At one time I thought White was right—Ebonics was a joke, it was slang, those people who speak that way are undereducated, they do not know how to speak correctly. Yes, I agreed that SAE was the appropriate way to speak; I surrendered to what I call White-brained thinkedness, and at one time I even felt that authentic voices should be silenced. This truth about myself is embarrassing and makes me want to cry. Sharing this makes me feel disingenuous. In this entire essay I problematized the English only policy, but in truth at one time I agreed with it. I was sold out (slang for when African Americans assimilate to the White culture). I assimilated to

another culture in my home country. Assimilation is not limited to immigrants giving up their cultures to assume the culture of a new country: Sam and Berry (2006) describe it as when a person turns away from their original culture and attempts to interact with a different culture. That is what I did. I turned my back to AAVE and assimilated to SAE. I am grateful that this work revealed the truth; AAVE is a relevant language spoken by a group of people and it should rightly be recognized as that. What is an autoethnography without self-truth, self-reflection, and self-examination?

Recommended Strategies for Teachers Navigating the Code of Power in Education

I am currently an ESL teacher at a school district near Detroit. Now is the time to abolish the old attitudes about English Language Learners no matter what their heritage language maybe. Knowing how I navigated and negotiated SAE, I desire for my students to have an easier transition from their native language to acquiring SAE (adding SAE without subtracting their native language) or academic language without sacrificing their authentic identities.

In order to do this, I encourage my students to use their own language as a foundation to gain understanding of academic language. Students are allowed to use their native language in my classroom, though this is not part of the school policy. When presenting a new concept I constantly remind students to think of their own language and to try to draw connections to SAE (e.g., code switching and contrastive analysis). I will ask students, what does this word mean in your language? Sometimes we (students and I) use English words that are cognates (similar pronunciation and meaning) in their language; I take this opportunity to tell students, "See, you already know this word, you are so smart." Even when words are very different I take a moment to encourage students by telling them that, "I am learning too, you taught me a new word today." In this way I am guiding students in their language acquisition process—not creating a classroom hierarchy to deposit knowledge into them as if students do not come to school with knowledge.

Lisa Delpit (2008) believes in an additive approach (adding to the students culture instead of subtracting from the culture) to language learning. She suggests that students' minority language (in this case AAVE) should be used as a scaffold towards standardized language (code switching from AAVE to SAE word choices). Students learn to use either language variety in a specific setting, whether formal or informal (a place of business and school or with family and friends). She discusses this strategy in *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in The Classroom*. This source helps educators to gain clearer understanding about the importance of code switching. This is especially helpful for teachers who teach in the African American Community.

A strategy that is useful to assist AAVE speakers in code switching is contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis is a bilingual bicultural approach that can be used to assist foreign language speakers and AAVE speakers into acquiring a second language (e.g., SAE) (Fisher and Lapp, 2013; Hollie, Butler, and Gillenwaters, 2015). In using this strategy AAVE speakers view the language in written form side by side coupled with practicing verbally and in written tasks. They learn to analyze the salient differences between SAE and AAVE and achieve a greater understanding about their AAVE language and SAE. As a result, students learn how to negotiate and navigate in both languages. One particularly helpful article to explain more about contrastive analysis is "Talk Like the Test: Guiding Speakers of African American Vernacular English" by Douglass Fisher and Diane Lapp (2013). Another helpful source is "Balancing Pedagogy with Theory: The Infusion of African American Language Research into Everyday Pre-K-12 Teaching Practices" by Sharocky Hollie, Tamara Butler, and Jamila Gillenwaters (2015).

Another strategy that I use is teaching concepts through skits and plays. Augusto Boal added to Freire's (1970/1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a theatre framework. Boal's (1979/1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed* uses theatre strategies give the oppressed a voice and to inform others about social injustices. Additionally, audience members are welcomed to participate in the sketches. Strategies include

forum theatre, in which actors begin by acting out an oppressive sketch, freeze into position, then an audience member joins in the stage, replaces the protagonist, and shapes the action into a different direction. In newspaper theatre, a sketch is created from the news, actors act it out, then audience members are invited to prevent the injustice from occurring in a reenactment.

In my classroom I have a designated an area set up as a theater. My students are predominately Middle Eastern; I use current news and pictures about Islamophobia (dislike or prejudice against Islam or Muslims), deportation, or other social injustices against minority cultures to evoke a candid conversation. I encourage the students to act these situations out in the theater area. Afterwards, we continue our discussion about the issue. In these activities I have found that students negotiate their language by creating a new dialogue about social, cultural and political problems. They use Arabic and English until they negotiate meaning in the social justice problem. Many times students point out the injustices of current social issues in their own countries like Syria and Yemen. This strategy is most rewarding, as I have learned so much about Discourse from my students.

Self-Reflection: My Adult Voice

I have come to discover that because I was oppressed and silenced for speaking AAVE I was not allowed to socialize and be considered a group member with my White peers. Even though I acquired the language well I still could not socialize with White children because I am a Black person. Simultaneously, due to speaking SAE it has been difficult socializing with some African Americans. Growing up not being able to socialize with anyone besides my family members has been the root of deep pain. Gee (2013) contends we all want solidarity, to be in a member of a group. Early on I was an outsider in the White community, I believe I had come to accept it. In contrast, it is still very difficult to make peace with being on the outside of one's own culture. Fortunately, I have found it has become a little easier to talk to African Americans in the workplace and at the university. Mostly, they are not so quick to judge my voice as some

strangers are. Language has social dimensions that reflect and portray one's "demographic, geographic, sociological, educational, and religious background" (Spolsky, 1998). No matter how hard we may try we cannot hide from our voices, though even now I often try to speak generic (i.e., speak as if I do not belong to any cultural group). In recent years, I was told by a fellow teacher (who happened to be White), "You have no accent all," and I thought to myself, good. In reflection, I thought that if I did not sound White or Black I could not be hurt.

SAE has empowered me to use my voice amidst privileged societies, but with a price: my African American identity. My childhood memories of searching for solidarity through language status still haunt me. The importance of identifying completely with other African Americans in appearance and language far outweighs speaking SAE. Though self-acceptance is easier as an adult, my SAE prevails when I am not guarded. A few years ago as I was working at a predominantly African American school I had a conversation with an African-American co-worker in a hallway just outside of classrooms. A fellow teacher (also African American) stepped out of one of the classes to ask, "Do you really talk like That?" He then began to imitate me, using a hyperexaggerated SAE voice. All I could do was laugh though I felt ashamed of my SAE voice and humiliated that I no longer have an AAVE voice. I desperately wanted to disappear into the dirty beige hallway walls. The co-worker that I was speaking with tried to defend me by saying, "She's just proper." If I could effectively code switch to an authentic AAVE voice I would not encounter experiences of feeling like a language outcast within my culture.

In comparison to my childhood, the view from others of my spoken language has reversed. Initially, White people ridiculed my AAVE voice then, and now—since graduating high school—some African Americans ridicule my SAE voice. Language status classifies us according to what language we use (Gee, 2012; Spolsky, 1998). SAE is classified as a language used by the dominant society and AAVE is classified as a language or variety used by minority groups. So I question what Whites and African Americans must

think when they see me or other African Americans who use SAE as their main language. Sometimes our voices are not conscious decisions.

In my story of navigating and negotiating through SAE I revealed an old issue that is still present in today's school system. Even today, skooz still be hat'in on languages other than SAE. As an insider I used examples to demonstrate the way I was forced to acquire SAE. In navigating through languages I negotiated meaning in order to understand school subjects. My experience is indeed a strong portrayal of subtractive schooling. In observation of my schooling experience teachers did not support my heritage language, I was never advised to use my own language and adopt a new one. Instead I was encouraged to believe that my language was poor. When a language is de-legitimized the speaker of the language is thought to be illegitimate. Enforcing English only policies causes damages far beyond words. Language represents a culture. Banning a language is the equivalent to banning an individual who speaks the banned language. My story demonstrates the internal harm that occurs when educators and others do not understand that language is not hierarchical. My inherited language is beautiful, valuable, and meaningful.

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