

Charlotte Brammer

LINGUISTIC CULTURAL CAPITAL AND BASIC WRITERS

ABSTRACT: Students who generally end up in basic writing classrooms lack the linguistic cultural capital that would allow them to recognize and use the codes necessary for academic success. Whatever words we use to describe and explain or excuse the failures or non-conforming products written by these students, we cannot ignore their problems. While there is some ambiguity as to what constitutes linguistic cultural capital for the academy, Formal Written English (as defined by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes) seems to be an important part of it. In this article, student essays are used to illustrate the linguistic variations that many basic writing students bring to the academy and then offer some insights from second language acquisition and literacy studies that may help writing specialists enhance pedagogical practice to better serve these students.

The arbiters of “good” language are less concerned about breakdowns in meaning or comprehensibility than they are about deviations from an imposed form.

—J. K. Chambers

Introduction

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, protagonist Jay Gatsby remains outside the coveted social circle of Nick Carraway and the Buchanans. In fiction, Gatsby epitomizes Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of constraints imposed by cultural capital: Gatsby could not break into the social circle because he lacks the essential codes or inherent knowledge and mannerisms that would allow his acceptance. Gatsby overcame economic impoverishment but cannot overcome social impoverishment. He does not speak the same language as the social elite, and thus he is effectively silenced at his own parties. Cultural capital is “embodied” by the individual and “cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange” (Bourdieu 244). Even Gatsby’s extensive wealth cannot buy cultural capital because it must be ac-

Charlotte Brammer is completing her doctoral work in Applied Linguistics at The University of Alabama, where she teaches a variety of writing classes, including composition, technical writing, and management communication. Her research interests include dialect influence on writing, error perception, as well as issues in technical and professional communication. Charlotte has published in Business Communication Quarterly and serves as editorial assistant for IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication.

quired and “always remains marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition which, through the more or less visible marks they leave (such as the pronunciations characteristic of a class or region), help to determine its distinctive value” (Bourdieu 245). Gatsby can never mimic Daisy’s voice, the voice of old money.

For many basic writing students, this fictional scenario is real. These students lack the cultural capital, specifically the linguistic cultural capital, to recognize and to utilize the necessary written codes for academic success. We know that students who are read to and who come from homes where literacy is privileged and encouraged are more likely to succeed in the classroom. Middle-class students from backgrounds that uphold, re-enforce, and privilege literacy, in terms of writing and reading, perform more successfully in college composition classes than do those students from outside that social class.

As tempting as it may be to assume that the only students who have problems with writing for the university are African Americans or Latinos from troubled inner city schools, it is simply untrue. As Marshall writes, “We can no more assume we know the class status or the literacy practices of the White students in our classrooms than we can presume that the African-American students present speak non-standard English or grew up in the inner city” (232). Many of my students are from white, rural, often working-class families. Some are first generation college students. The differences between their linguistic codes and the ones favored by the university are just as great as they are for the recognized minority students.

Who are linguistic outsiders?

Many basic writing students are, to use Burke’s term, not con-substantial with us. They speak and write a language that is different from ours. Aside from this difference, however, a “typical” basic writer is difficult to describe. As Rossen-Knill and Lynch illustrate, basic writers vary, in terms of demographics, from one school to another. Their language variety, particularly as they write, marks them as “basic writers,” as “outsiders.” Wolfram and Schilling-Estes describe varieties of American English as a continuum, with Formal Edited English (which is largely written) at one end and other dialects ranking from those marked as socially informal to socially stigmatized (such as African American Vernacular [AAVE] and Southern American Vernacular [SAV]). Informal English dialects are spoken by upper and middle socio-economic groups and, as Wolfram and Schilling-Estes point out, are defined by the absence of stigmatized features. These informal dialects vary by regions but are acknowledged as “standard” or “correct” by most native speakers, regardless of dialect. Tellingly, varieties as-

sociated with lower socio-economic classes are marked by stigmatized features like *be*-copula absence.

If we accept the premise that AAVE and Formal English are both dialects, then we can entertain the notion that writing college essays is especially difficult for those students whose oral dialects are more distinct from the formal written dialect. This seems logically sound, and in fact seems to play out accurately within the composition classroom. If we look closely, we can surmise why: Not only is the oral dialect of these students dissimilar to the written one in terms of language, but the rhetorical styles are also dissimilar.

When we compare the rhetorical patterns of a five-paragraph essay to the rhetorical styles of African American or Latino or lower income White groups, we realize that these groups develop arguments along different, although not necessarily less effective or even less correct, lines. Furthermore, students from non-literate backgrounds, or from groups that reject and criticize literacy and academic success, are likely to be at a disadvantage because they have not had the exposure to the rhetorical devices that they are expected to master in college writing. Instead of the rhetorical skills normally used for written discourse, they employ tools useful for spoken discourse, often omitting pertinent details and introductory remarks that are unnecessary in face-to-face verbal communication. As Lisa Delpit writes:

Literacy communicates a message solely through a text, through the *word*. Orality, by contrast, has available to it other vehicles for communication: not only is the message transmitted through words (the text), but by factors such as the relationship of the individuals talking, where the interaction is taking place, what prior knowledge and/ or understanding the participants bring to the communication encounter, the gestures used, the speaker's ability to adjust the message if the audience doesn't understand, intonation, facial expressions, and so forth – the *con*, (meaning "with") in *context*. (96)

In some ways, these students lack the linguistic cultural capital that would set them up for academic success because they possess the communicative and integrative codes for a culture that is not in power within the academic arena.

Not knowing or being unfamiliar with the codes impedes students in their attempts to communicate through writing. One bright and creative student, whom I will refer to as L. M., spent over an hour writing the following brief diagnostic essay, an assignment typical of many university composition classes:

I chose to come to [this university], because it's a high recommended college, I could get a chance to meet a lot of people, and they gave me the most money.

As I begin narrowing down my college choices, there was this one university that everyone in [my state] dreams of attending. In this state, [this university] is high recommend and well accredited too. My teachers all thought that this would be the best school for me, because I would receive a quality education and get a chance to meet a lot of people.

Since I have been here, I have meet people from different cultural backgrounds ranging from A to Z. This isn't a campus filled with only blacks, like my high school. Just by walking around the campus you see blacks, whites, and chinese, and etc..

I received the highest amount of money from this school so that was really I final deciding factor, but now that chosing a college its over, to me coming to [this university] had to be the best decision.

Many people reading this essay would undoubtedly walk away unimpressed by both the student's writing and any university that would admit him. By traditional standards, the essay lacks development, coherence, and progression, among other things, and is riddled with grammatical errors. From a traditionalist perspective, this student may seem uneducable; his writing does not reflect the linguistic cultural capital deemed "basic" for academic writing.

The student who wrote this essay is a young African American male, verbally articulate in English, although not in the dialect closest to Formal Written English, and he is successful in other disciplines that rely less on written communication. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that this student has had twelve years of formal schooling prior to writing this essay. This essay reflects a bare skeleton of the five-paragraph essay that most students are required to write in high school. Additionally, the first paragraph reads like a three-point thesis statement, albeit a poorly worded one. The student tries to write the essay that he knows the instructor expects, but he cannot successfully deliver.

I do not want to downplay the additional problems that come with race or ethnicity; however, I do want to emphasize that many White students are equally unprepared to assume their roles in written discourse communities. Heath's lengthy ethnographic study of the African American and White communities in the Piedmont region of South Carolina seems to support this assertion. Neither group of children in her study was well prepared for or remarkably successful in school. For the African American residents of Trackton, writing is a

base from which “performances,” whether “raising a hymn” or “raising a prayer,” can be built. For the Whites from Roadville, however, writing is confining.

According to Heath, writing for Roadville residents is a practical tool: they, usually the women, write grocery lists, letters, and brief reports (usually on forms). “Behind the written word is an authority, and the text is a message which can be taken apart only insofar as its analysis does not extend too far beyond the text and commonly agreed upon experiences” (Heath 234-235). The following essay, written as a first day diagnostic assignment by a first year university student, whom I will call S. S., illustrates my point that lack of academic preparedness is not confined by race or ethnicity:

There are many reasons from me chosing [this university] for college as the [marching band], a good Pre-med program, and that my family is great fans of [this university]. [This University] is a great academic school to attend, they have a good selection of programs to study. Along with [this university] being academically brilliant, there football team and [marching band] programs roar in success. Being accepted into [this university] was the greatest thing to happen to me. I have always been a [university] fan.

Since the fifth grade I have been in a band program playing the alto saxophone. The in highschool I chose to march and suport the Pride of the Patriots, our football team. So when I was signing up for college noone could beat the [marching band]. Marching band takes a lot of time and practice, but when your out there marching at half time all the hard work is worth it. Chosen to March in [this university's] Band was a great glory for me as this is what I've always wanted to do.

Academically choosing [this university] was easy, there Pre-med program is one of the best in the South. The Arts and Science program at [this university] is excellent, they have many different studies to chose from and counslers waiting to help. I already had a cousin and uncle graduate from [this university], showing the excellence in Pre-med. Along with the school being hard and a lot of studying, I'm sure I will do well.

My family since I was very young have all sat around the television cheering on [this university]. They always told me this is where I would go to school, now I can say I was finally accepted. Right now it seems I'm far away from home missing my family and friends. Soon I will be calling this home. Being from [another state] I always thought I would go to [my home state's university], but when I came and visited here, I

knew it was for me.

[This university] is a good school to chose for college. Having many reasons to chose [this university], hopefully I will be a success. The [marching band] is a great honor to be in now my family can cheer not only for the football team, but also for their daughter. I am proud to be going to [this university] and one day looking back seeing my success.

The author of this essay is a White female, for whom English is her first language. She speaks a Southern Vernacular dialect and is the first person from her immediate family to attend college.

Like the first student, S.S. is trying to write a five-paragraph essay with a thesis sentence in the introduction and three body paragraphs to develop that thesis. Like L. M., she is unsuccessful. From a traditional perspective, the essay is redundant, makes very little progression, rambles in focus, displays problems with verb phrases, inappropriate word choice, pronoun confusion, and sentence boundaries, and essentially fails to portray communicative competence. The pedagogical challenge is to help students like L. M. and S. S. develop the linguistic codes that will enable them to communicate effectively within the academic community.

What do current pedagogical practices offer linguistic outsiders?

Error perception is central to current pedagogical practices. Mina Shaughnessy's definition of errors as "unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader" (12) has almost become a mantra for many compositionists. Working both from Shaughnessy's call to search for the logic of errors and from studies in second language acquisition, researchers from composition, rhetoric, and linguistics have started looking into patterns and influences that create variations or perceived errors in written text. (For discussion in composition studies, see Hairston; Coleman; Bruch and Marback. In rhetoric, see for example Ball and also Brandt. In linguistics, see Heath; Labov; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes.) While much has been learned about how and why learners might produce inappropriate variations in their writing, that knowledge has had varying influences on pedagogy. Wolfram et al (1999) identify three alternatives that are used with linguistic outsiders: annihilation, accommodation, and "somewhere in between" (26).

Annihilation is central to "English Only" movements that have

gained momentum, at least outside the classroom. Classroom practices focus on error correction and devalue the multi-cultural experiences and language varieties of students and teachers. Success is measured by standardized tests. The message is viewed as most important, and any deviation that might hinder communication of that message is judged negatively.

Unlike annihilation, accommodation is motivated by a commitment to value the learner's home language, to acknowledge individual voice and creativity that struggles outside the dominant language ideology. The focus is on the writer, rather than the message. However, those who teach using the accommodation method recognize that students or writers, particularly those who are linguistic outsiders, must know and be able to construct and deconstruct arguments written or spoken in the dominant language form if they are to take active roles within the ongoing discourses. Others have recognized that expressivist forms of writing instruction may not be the most effective methods for teaching the very students they purport to protect. (See Cope and Kalantzis; Ball; Briggs and Pailliotet.)

Instead of trying to either eliminate home language influences or protect learners from language purists, some writing instructors are trying an additive approach to language learning. Drawing on work from contrastive rhetoric, such as Connor and Ball, and in applied linguistics, notably studies by Labov and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, these teachers try to build on the students' current language skills and knowledge. This approach seems to gain support from studies in second language acquisition and literacy.

What can we learn from second language acquisition?

By suggesting that studies in second language acquisition can offer insight for basic writing instruction, I do not mean to equate native English-speaking basic writing students with English as a second language students. Research indicates significant differences between their composing processes, language use, cultural perspectives, and motivation. (Three studies that provide rich descriptions of these differences are those by Silva and Leki, by Atkinson and Ramanathan, and by Nero.) Recognizing learner differences, however, does not necessarily negate any possible value that pedagogical theories from ESL research may have for basic writing instruction.

Error analysis is one focus of research in second language acquisition that has relevance for basic writing pedagogy. According to Ellis, studies in error analysis reveal that errors are "an inevitable feature of the learning process. Indeed, the very concept of 'error' came to be

challenged on the grounds that learners act systematically in accordance with mental grammars they have constructed and that their utterances are well-formed in terms of these grammars" (71). Viewing "errors" as a reflection of a coherent system of language use opens dialogue on language variety and appropriateness. For example, explicit instruction can be given to make learners aware of the specific language rule, which is called "consciousness-raising" in second language studies, and knowledge of the rule may help learners acquire the language feature sooner rather than later (Ellis, and Rutherford). Some AAVE and SAV speakers systematically omit *-s* on third-person single present-tense verbs. (This feature is also heavily stigmatized.) A consciousness-raising approach encourages instructors to make these speakers aware that while the morphological ending is not used in their specific dialect, it is expected in Formal Written English. This does not mean the learner will always or even immediately use the rule, but by making the learner more aware of this particular rule, the instructor has encouraged the learner to make learning it a goal.

In addition to informing our assessment of errors as learner language variation, second language studies can also help us look at issues of motivation in student learning. Learners will vary in their acceptance, rejection, or negotiation of the dominant culture. For some learners, at least, accepting or adopting the White middle class codes means selling out or losing identification with their family and community. We see this when African-American inner-city adolescents begin to hide their academic accomplishments, even to the point of turning in inferior work rather than being different from their peers, and we see it in the rural White students who drop out of school as soon as they are old enough, presumably because neither they nor their families value formal education. For some of these students, the social cost of assimilation makes it undesirable.

Schumann's Acculturation Model addresses how second language learners do or do not assimilate into the new culture. In this model, Schumann argues that language has three general functions: communicative, integrative, and expressive. Furthermore, he suggests that "restriction in function can be seen as resulting from social and/or psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee" (267). In sum, factors that create greater social and/or psychological distance between learners and the target language will impede learning and acculturation. In other words, linguistic outsiders need to be reassured that their dialect is not "wrong." Students need to know that their language and culture are valued and that learning Formal Written English is simply another dialect for specific situations.

Language acquisition is more than learning words; it is learning how to use language as one tool for navigating and negotiating within a particular culture. If the learner feels threatened or distant from a

culture, then the learner may not be motivated to acquire the language and the accompanying linguistic cultural capital. Indeed, the learner may be resistant to acculturation. For those students who enter the university not knowing and not using expected “basic” writing tools, like Formal Written English and some version of the five-paragraph essay, the “correcting tool” of social practice that is supposed to encourage them toward acquiring those tools becomes a “weeding out device.” According to Gee, “Each Discourse necessitates that members, at least while they are playing roles within the Discourse, act as if they hold particular beliefs and values about what counts as the ‘right sort’ of person and the ‘right’ way to be in the world, and thus too, what counts as the ‘wrong’ sort and the ‘wrong’ way” (148). For many basic writing students, this means trying to identify with the dominant classroom culture as “right” and eschewing their own identity as, if not “wrong,” at least as “other.”

However, exceptions do exist; some learners, as individuals, are able to “violate the modal tendency of [the] group” and achieve success in acquiring the target language (Schumann 267). Several individuals have stepped forward with autobiographic studies that discuss how they learned to write, notably, Lisa Delpit, Keith Gilyard, and Mike Rose. In different ways, these writers acknowledge the influences that teachers and mentors had on them as language learners. They also refer to a sense of alienation from White middle class society and to a struggling or metacognitive building of language(s) as not only influencing, but also enriching their writing.

What can we learn from literacy studies?

Brandt captures this consensus of learning literacy as a “piling up and extending out of literacy” (651). According to Brandt, “transformations in literacy accompany large-scale economic, technological, and cultural changes” (659). She continues through example to show “how much the meaning of education and educated language had begun to change by mid-century – shifting from the cultivated talk of the well-bred to the efficient professional prose of the technocrat – thereby altering the paths of upward mobility” (659). With the burgeoning of twentieth century technology and an increasing recognition of civil rights, those citizens previously disenfranchised from society have capitalized on the vast changes and discovered new paths to economic and cultural success. Thus, “[w]hereas at one time literacy might have been best achieved by attending to traditional knowledge and tight locuses of meaning, literacy in an advanced literate period requires an ability to work the borders between tradition and change, an ability to adapt and improvise and amalgamate” (Brandt

660). Those outsiders who achieve success in this environment of cultural, technical, and economic flux have mastered the skills of adaptability and amalgamation. They have learned to synthesize old and new restraints to formulate new linguistic cultural capital that not only enables their success but that constrains and otherwise restricts the capital of those whose power they wish to usurp and who wish to usurp their newly found power.

As Bourdieu (1996) states, “cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously” (245). That is, some periods and social classes will be more accepting of difference and will have more accessible codes than others. Some will be inclusive, inviting newcomers, while others will be exclusive, thwarting the hopes of those who want in.

Students who know how to use language to express themselves and to communicate with others need to learn critical strategies to fulfill the integrative function of language, especially the written language, and not only to push against the borders but to reshape and weaken them. Rose asserts that “Good teaching... is almost defined by its tendency to push on the border of things” (13). As teachers, we need to identify those borders and assist our students in defying them. We cannot do this by teaching writing as if all of our students come to class equally versed in the rhetorical and syntactic skills necessary for producing expected and acceptable written discourse in the academy.

How might we better assist outsiders in acquiring linguistic capital?

Perhaps the question that we as educators must now ask is, given the constant change that permeates the cultural literacy of our current society, how do we train or facilitate our students in their mastery of these specialized, yet seemingly generic, skills of adaptability, particularly in their writing? Julie Foertsch suggests that cognitive psychology may hold the key to answering this question. She carves out a synthesized position somewhere between a “local, highly contextualized knowledge and general, relatively decontextualized knowledge” (362). This position tries to re-direct a current pedagogical split between traditional freshman composition curriculum and writing across the curriculum approaches (363). Foertsch writes:

It is useful to turn to research in cognitive psychology, which suggests that a teaching approach that uses higher-level abstractions and specific examples *in combination* will be more

effective in promoting transfer-of-learning than will either method alone. (364, emphasis in original)

Thus, students need to learn higher-level abstractions, like narrative structure, but they also need specific examples of how to organize their own narratives at the paragraph level and overall.

Moreover, novices must have guidelines or other cues that will assist them in effectively transferring relevant data or memories because otherwise they have less chance of successfully solving the assigned problems. Furthermore,

expert problem solvers are probably helped by two interdependent processes: a strategic process that prompts them to analyze the generic structure of a given problem, and an automatic process that makes them more accurate at abstracting structural properties due to the larger number of problems they have encountered. Novices' lack of familiarity with relevant problems makes them less inclined to analyze the problems in terms of their underlying generic structure However, even if novices will always be less accurate than experts at identifying the relations that are relevant, they *can* be explicitly instructed to use the same strategy that experts use. (Foertsch 372)

Foertsch claims that transfer of learning can occur through extensive experience, which is slow, and through explicit instruction, which shortcuts past experience because the learners try to "deliberately and mindfully abstract underlying principles from the problems they encounter" (Foertsch 373). Instruction involves the teaching of metacognitive strategies that help learners shortcut, but not necessarily supplant, experience. In short, both general and specific knowledge must be shared with learners if they are to achieve successful learning results. This is conceptually similar to consciousness-raising in second language acquisition studies.

For the basic composition classroom, this means we may better serve our students not by teaching discipline specific knowledge exclusively, but rather by choosing the best mix of strategies and guidelines that will support our students who wish to shorten their learning curve. In other words, we must assist our students who desire access to the codes that will most enhance their chances of success in securing linguistic cultural capital by teaching specific strategies, such as organization patterns at the essay, paragraph, and sentence levels. From this outward-reaching, social-epistemic vantage, we may find assistance in the suggestions of Doug Brent and James Berlin.

In *Reading as Rhetorical Invention*, Doug Brent categorizes reading as part of a “building of communal knowledge through rhetorical interchange” (72). When people read, they bring to the interpretation of that text all of their prior cultural experiences and textual knowledge. Thus, those who are well-read or who benefit from culturally literate families have a larger “repertoire” of codes from which to form “schemata,” that is “preexisting patterns which condition the way meaning is formed out of the individual experience of the reader” (Brent 28). As Brent points out, acceptance of the repertoire or schemata as methods of invention and interpretation should not be taken as a rejection of research based writing until students have achieved some massive store of discipline specific knowledge, but rather “to delay immersing students in research until their repertoire is formed is to deny them access to one of the most important of the processes that form it” (107). Berlin also urges instructors to require students to read critically as a way of discovering rhetorical moves. Just as Foertsch surmises from her forages in cognitive psychology, Brent concludes that novices or students benefit from an exposure to specific knowledge and to decentered, general strategies, like Aristotle’s *pisteis*, because this combination of knowledge better equips those students in forming sound judgments based on reasonable evidence. I suggest that this extension may provide better access for students to what Foertsch calls the shortcut to linguistic cultural capital. For composition pedagogy, it suggests that some students may benefit from specific instruction in traditional modes for organizing essays, including explicit directions on how to shape a comparison essay paragraph by paragraph, for example.

In addition to critical reading and analysis, students may benefit from more explicit instruction in syntactic cohesion, perhaps especially through the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), and attention to grammatical style. The style of a written text is created by the cumulative effect of its sentences. When writers change perspective mid-sentence or even between sentences, they break the text’s cohesion. For example, S.S. disrupts the cohesion of her sentence when she writes: *Along with the school being hard and a lot of studying, I’m sure I will do well.* For some writers, however, who are unaccustomed to looking at their writing from a reader perspective, these breaks are inconsequential. Explicit instruction may help these writers understand why this is a problem and how to make the text more cohesive for the reader. In a study of the writing of business students, Campbell et al found that explicit instruction in style (specifically in terms of conciseness, directness, active/passive usage, word choice, and parallelism) improved the quality ratings of those student writers’ written texts.

How would this affect the way we look at students and their writing?

Perhaps the most dramatic impact these insights from second language and literacy studies could have is a new lens for looking at linguistic variations in student writing. Rather than choosing to annihilate or accommodate variations in written language, we can opt to analyze those variations to discover systematic influences so that we can help students become more aware of where the variations are, why the variations are intrusive, and what linguistic options exist. At this point, it may be helpful to look at the student essays again. The following table provides a summary of my linguistic analysis of sample variations from Formal Written English in the two essays.

Example Variations from Formal Written English		
	Essay 1 (L. M.)	Essay 2 (S. S.)
Morphological Variations	<i>-ly</i> absence on <i>high</i> <i>-ed</i> absence on <i>recommend</i>	<i>Chooosen</i> in place of <i>choosing</i>
Semantic Variations	<i>highest amount</i> rather than <i>largest amount</i>	<i>There football team and [marching band] roar in success</i> rather than <i>are successful</i>
Syntactic Variations	Omission of final inflection on past participle (<i>-ed</i> on <i>recommend</i> and <i>begin</i>)	Subject-verb disagreement: <i>My family since I was young have...</i>
Pragmatic Variations	Shift in perspective: <i>As I begin narrowing down my college choices, there was this one...</i>	Tangential, relationship focused syntactic organization. Multiple shifts in perspective.

Table: Comparison of variations from Formal Written English in Student Essays 1 and 2.

First, we will look at L. M.'s essay. In terms of morphology, L. M. omits the *-ly* on *high* twice. The repetition makes this more likely a variation rather than a typo or mistake. The discrepancy between the writer's use of *recommended* and *recommend*, however, is less straightforward. One possibility is the phonetic environment. In the first use, when the *-ed* inflection is present, *recommended* is followed by *college*, but in the second instance, when the inflection is omitted, *recommend* is followed by *and*. A more likely hypothesis is the syntactic structure of the sentences. In the first use, *recommended* is a participial adjective modifying *college*; in the second sentence, *recommend* is a past passive participle of the verb phrase since the omission of final inflections on verbs (especially third person verbs following *be* forms) is common in vernacular dialects, including AAVE (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes; Rickford and Rickford); the *-ed* deletion here may be an uncatalogued AAVE feature.

Aside from the morphological problems, the essay also exhibits semantic variations from Formal Written English. The phrase *the highest amount of money* displays a semantic incongruence between the adjective *highest* and the noun *amount*. In Formal English, we expect *largest* rather than *highest*. As Leech and Svartvik explain, *high* is one of a unique group of words that can function as either adjectives or adverbs but which "are mostly connected with time, position, and direction" (223). We are able to understand what the writer means, but the word choice is awkward and disruptive to a reader accustomed to the Formal form. This variation may be the result of the writer trying to avoid repeating the exact wording of his thesis statement, *the most money*.

While the morphologic and semantic variations are distracting, the most confounding differences, from a pedagogic perspective, may be pragmatic. At several places in the essay, the writer switches perspectives mid-sentence: *As I begin narrowing down my college choices, there was this one university that everyone in [this university] dreams of attending*. The first disjuncture occurs between the introductory clause and the main subject. The existential *there was this one* does not relate directly to *I*, nor does it fit with the expected formality of a freshman composition. The writer, it seems, is trying to set up a story about the university, a story with fairy-tale-like qualities where he has the choice of attending the one school that everyone else only dreams of attending. Unfortunately, the message he tries to convey in the academic essay is negated because his usage varies substantially from Formal Written English.

The comment that he selected this particular university because it was *not filled with only blacks, like my high school* is interesting because this student is African American. He seems to indicate that going to an all-black school was problematic, perhaps because it limited his

exposure to other cultures, especially the dominant White culture. Underlying this statement is a perception that his school was somehow less acceptable or maybe even less academically rigorous. If we look at Schumann's Acculturation Model, we might conclude that the student is motivated, for whatever reason, to acquire the language and accompanying cultural codes that he perceives will help him successfully negotiate the academic arena and, furthermore, that he wants to identify, at least to some extent, with that dominant culture.

When asked to write a fictional narrative essay, the same student responded with a narrative dialogue. In the first paragraph, a son complains to his mother:

Hey moma. Hey moma. "Why do you make me do so much work? I cook, I clean, I wash, I mow the fields, and on top of that, I have to go to school everyday. On each day that I don't complete these chores, you always fuss or put me on punishment. Moma, do you really think it's fair to treat me this way? I feel like a slave, who's been put on this plantation to serve you."

The mother responds for the rest of the essay. Mechanical issues aside, the essay shows an effective use of dialogue, good attention to details that evoke a sense of reality within the dialogue, and a comfort and fluency with the use of dialogue, even writing in a cadence that mimics an oral story. This student needs to learn the preferred linguistic codes, the "how to" of writing, but he already knows the "what."

The resonance of his voice throughout the narrative echoes the privilege given to oral stories within the African American communities, the same privileging of oral richness that Delpit, Gilyard, and Rose describe. To paraphrase Delpit, when we teach other people's children, we must take care not only to acknowledge the differences in dialect but also to include the importance of personal relationships within the communities and cultures (95). Perhaps, as educators, we should try to access this potential competence for expressive language to encourage a stronger metacognitive appreciation for written language within the learners.

S. S.'s essay exhibits fewer morphological variations than L. M.'s does. The main morphological variation is *chosen* instead of *choosing*. This could be influenced by phonology. In speech, perhaps especially in Southern speech, *-en* and *-ing* often sound alike. Confusing these morphemes, however, could cause linguistic insiders to perceive S.S. as careless, lazy, or ignorant. Other problematic variations with this essay involve pragmatics and syntax. For example, in this sentence, *My family since I was very young have all sat around the television cheering on [this university]*, the student places a sentence adjectival clause be-

tween the subject head and the verb when in formal writing it is normally placed at the beginning of the sentence. In speech, perhaps particularly in her Southern Vernacular dialect, this construction is acceptable and may even be preferred as a way to enrich the story. This is not the only instance where the student branches out from her main subject-verb context to provide additional detail in an almost tangential way. The following sentence illustrates my point:

I already had a cousin and uncle graduate from [this university], showing the excellence in Pre-med. Along with the school being hard and a lot of studying, I'm sure I will do well.

In explaining the excellence of the university's pre-med program, the student does not quote statistics or test scores, but rather she tells the reader that she knows two people who have been in the program. She has first-hand knowledge of the program. Much of southern culture esteems personal knowledge above more empirical knowledge, and if a speaker wants to build a strong argument, claiming to know someone who has first-hand knowledge is important. The student draws from her culture to provide additional support for her decision to attend this university. Unfortunately, this support is another deviation from the expected Formal linearly arranged essay: she makes the connection that because the pre-med program will be challenging and because she will study hard, she will do well in medical school. This taps into the traditional belief that she can succeed if she works hard enough. Unfortunately, her academic essay does not send the metacognitive message to the linguistic insider that she either works hard or is competent.

Orally, however, this student is quite competent. She told me, in detail, about watching the university's football games with her father and uncle and about being more interested in the halftime shows than the games. She recalled being impressed by the university marching band's intricate marches that emphasized the music it played. As a budding musician, she yearned for the chance to be out on that football field with the university band. Her enthusiasm and dream fulfillment reflect poorly in the essay she produced. Sadly, S. S. left the university before completing her first semester.

For students like L. M. and S. S. who are unprepared to write using Formal Written English for the academic discourse community, we must teach them the critical strategies that they need to know. By looking at linguistic variation in student writing as simply another way of communicating rather than judging those variations (and, by extensions, those students), we can create an environment that enhances acculturation. My goal in discussing language variation with students is to communicate to the student where and when this language varia-

tion would be more effective and to illustrate linguistic options that are more effective in academic writing. I also emphasize that some features of academic writing would be equally inappropriate for other communicative purposes, such as an email to a best friend. While this approach values students' languages, it also opens a dialogue into which varieties work best for what situations. Students can start thinking about language style as another rhetorical option for communicating a given message, to a particular audience, through a specific medium. Students then see linguistic variation as a tool for facilitating communication within a discourse community.

To help perfect that tool, students need explicit instruction. For example, using functional sentence perspective, students can be taught to track new and given noun phrases as a way to control cohesion between sentences and paragraphs. Students can also be taught to create checklists, based on individual error analyses, for systematic variations. Thus, students who routinely omit past participle inflections can be made more aware of this feature (consciousness-raising) and learn to check their writing for unintentional instances of the variation. Finally, students can learn specific rhetorical strategies, like traditional organization patterns and expected ways of text development (description and example), that are part of written academic discourse but are different from their oral strategies. For example, students may need explicit instruction as to what types of supporting information and arguments are valued in the academy. After three months of focusing on written language in terms of syntax and paragraph and essay structure, L. M., who produced the first essay, also produced the following one.

Attending and graduating from both high school and college are mile stones in a person's life. Vividly there is a noticeable gap between them, but you can't complete one without the other. High is to college, as an employee is to an supervisor, meaning they're just a step a part. High school differs from college because of the responsibilities, the test formats, and the facilities.

One area in which the two differ, would be in the responsibilities. In high school, you have a family right there to support and make you get up to go to class. For instance, attendance, in high school the attendance policy states, "If a student miss eleven days in a particular class, he or she will fail." For example, last year this senior missed eleven days, and as a result wasn't allowed to march. On the contrary, in college the attendance policy states, "If a student miss more than three days his or her grade will drop a letter." For example, last semester I didn't make the dean's list, because af-

ter reviewing my attendance record, one of my grades dropped. The work ethic also is very different from high school compared to college. High school classes are more relaxed because you have only one or two assignments a week. For example, when I was in high school the only assignment was to study for the weekly quiz. On the other hand, in college the work ethic is more complex. A student may have to write a paper, take a test, read a story, and conduct experiments in course of one day. For example, my first day going to class, I had to write a thousand word essay. Another part of responsibility would be maintaining social balance. In high school social balance doesn't really play a big role. Since all the social gatherings for high school students had to be on the weekends, there was no pressure during the week. For example, during my senior year we tried to have an after party for one of our Thursday night football games, but the principle did not O.K. it. On the contrary, in college social balance plays a big role. For the simple fact there isn't curfew or any one to tell you what to do. For example, the first day of class there was a party that lasted till the next day.

The essay continues in similar fashion for four more lengthy paragraphs. While the essay can still be improved in terms of syntax and style, it reflects a significant improvement in development over the first essay. Noticeably absent are the morphological errors from the first essay. The student shows an improved understanding of sentence boundaries in Formal Written English (with the exception of one fragment). While he is overusing transition words, possibly because he has not developed other methods of transitioning in writing, the overall organization is more consistent with the expectations of Formal Written English. This essay reflects more variety in types of sentence structures and an increased use of complex sentences. Additionally, while each paragraph in the first essay struggles to average 3-4 sentences and provides little information beyond what is overtly stated in the introductory paragraph, the second paragraph in this essay makes assertions and backs them up with examples to create a structurally sound comparison of responsibilities for high school students versus college students. Over time and with additional instruction on how to write using Formal Written English, on which words, structures, and organization patterns work best for academic purposes, this student will, if he so chooses, be able to use writing as a means to access some of the linguistic cultural capital that will enable him to switch between discourse communities.

Where do we go from here?

While I do not suggest that we need to return completely to a traditional or even a current-traditional approach to teaching, I do believe that we, in academia, must consider what our students needs are, namely to produce written texts that express, communicate, and integrate thoughts in ways that are appropriate for a variety of written discourse communities. While their language may always remain “marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition,” they can learn to mimic codes valued by the academy.

We should continue to mine ESL studies for applicable methods and findings, like consciousness-raising and Schumann’s Acculturation Model, that have relevance for composition studies. Some ethnographic studies could specifically address how learners from various cultures learn to write successfully. Additionally, research that compares metacognitive skills of students from families who are “hyper-literate” with students from families that rarely read anything might be illuminating. Why do some children from non-print backgrounds become enthralled with reading and writing while others do not? The importance of these issues will increase as our schools, both secondary and eventually colleges and universities, learn to grapple with the growing number of multicultural and multi-lingual students that make up our society.

Author’s Note

A version of this article serves as the first chapter in the author’s dissertation at the University of Alabama. The data used in this article was presented at the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, April 19, 2002, in Memphis, TN.

Author’s Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge the wonderful support and encouragement I received from Catherine E. Davies and Kim Sydow Campbell as I prepared this manuscript. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their kind words and valuable input. Finally, I thank Carol Howell for her insights in working with basic writers.

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Dwight and Vai Ramanathan. “Cultures of Writing: An Ethnographic Comparison of L1 and L2 University Writing/Language Programs.” *TESOL Quarterly* 29.3 (1995): 539-568.
- Ball, Arnetha F. “Text Design Patterns in the Writing of Urban African American Students.” *Urban Education* 30.3 (1995): 253-289.

- Berlin, James A. "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom." *Rhetoric Review* 11.1 (1992): 16-33.
- . *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996.
- Brandt, Deborah. "Accumulating Literacy." *College English* 57(1995): 649-648.
- Brent, Doug. *Reading as Rhetorical Invention: Knowledge, Persuasion, and the Teaching of Research-based Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.
- Briggs, Lynn and Ann Watts Pailliotet. "A Story about Grammar and Power." *JBW*16.2 (1997): 46-61.
- Bruch, Patrick and Richard Marback. "Race Identity, Writing, and the Politics of Dignity: Reinvigorating the Ethics of 'Students' Right to Their Own Language.'" *Journal of Advanced Composition* 17.2 (1997): 267-281.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1950.
- Chaika, Elaine. *Language: The Social Mirror*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1994.
- Coleman, Charles F. "Our Students Write with Accents—Oral Paradigms for ESD Students." *CCC* 48.4 (1997): 486-500.
- Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis. *The Powers of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1993.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Elbow, Peter. "The War Between Reading and Writing—And How to End It." *Rhetoric Review* 12.1 (1993): 5-23.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925; New York: Collier, 1992.
- Foertsch, J. "Where Cognitive Psychology Applies: How Theories about Memory and Transfer Can Influence Composition Pedagogy." *Written Communication* 12.3 (1995): 360-83.
- Gee, James P. *The Social Mind: Language, Ideology, and Social Practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1992.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1991.
- Hairston, Maxine. "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage." *College English* 43.8 (1981): 794-806.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Labov, William. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. New York: Longman, 1966.
- Leech, G. and J. Svartvik. *A Communicative Grammar of English*, 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 1994.
- Marshall, Margaret J. "Marking the Unmarked: Reading Student Di-

- versity and Preparing Teachers." *CCC* 48.2 (1997): 231-48.
- Nero, Shondel J. "English is my native language . . . or so I believe." *TESOL Quarterly* 31.3 (1997): 585-592.
- Rickford, John R. and Russell J. Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.
- Rose, Mike. *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Rossen-Knill, Deborah, and Lynch, Kim. "A Method for Describing Basic Writers and Their Writing: Lessons from a Pilot Study." *JBW* 19.2 (2000): 93-117.
- Schumann, J. H. "Second Language Acquisition: The Pidginization Hypothesis." 1976: 225-62. Eds. H. Douglas Brown and Susan Gonzo. *Readings on Second Language Acquisition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1950.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Silva, Tony and Ilona Leki. "Broadening the Perspective of Mainstream Composition Studies: Some Thoughts from the Disciplinary Margins." *Written Communication* 14.3 (1997): 398-329.
- Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998.