

Whose English is it, anyway?

There's a lot to think about before we begin to speak



JASMINE WILLIAMS

Articulate.

I was about 26 years old the first time someone pointed out that I was articulate.

This was on a trip to Lithuania for a graduate-level disabilities studies class that focused on institutionalized youth in Lithuania and current changes that were supposed to reflect more humane practices toward children, adolescents, and their families in the country over time.

The speaker didn't use the word "articulate"—it was something like, "You speak so well!" The subtext was, "... for a Black girl."

Again, they didn't say that outright either. But there were no other Black or Brown people at the table—everyone else there was white, many of them "well-spoken". But no-one else at the table was told they spoke so well.

I recently presented a workshop at the AMS Montessori Event titled *Ways to Speak English: Are We Validating or Invalidating Certain Members of Our Community?*

My connection to this topic goes back a long way. After my first year of undergraduate education I noticed that I had been "code switching" a lot in class—shifting my language and cultural presentation to match the predominantly white institution I was attending. (There were at most ten Black and Brown students the year I began.)

After I graduated, I taught English in Chile through TESOL (formerly Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages—they go by just their acronym these days). I only realized later how that "O" in TESOL "others" non-English speakers right from the start.

My workshop was inspired by scholar and writer Dr. Jamila Lyiscott who speaks, writes and teaches about racial justice as Associate Professor of Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

I began by sharing Dr. Lyiscott's 2014 Ted Talk *Three Ways to Speak*

they were taken from their homelands leaving generations thereafter without the knowledge or understanding of what their ancestors spoke or sounded like.

We broke all these aspects down in the session. Attendees shared with one another, listing the countries and/or people whose languages have been removed from them because of colonization. One attendee raised her hand and simply said, "All of them"—a perspective we don't often consider.

Dr. Lyiscott also pointed out that American English, which we in the U.S. consider "standard" or "formal"



English. During her 4 minute 16 second delivery, she provides healing to Black and Brown folx who have been told, in one way or another, that they sound ignorant or speak poorly. She offers speakers of patois and African-American English a different social identity—one of being bilingual or even trilingual. She reminds listeners the cost of coloniality to African Americans specifically, whose mother tongues were "raped" from them as

English, can sound foolish to the British. This took us to a video compilation of the linguist Noam Chomsky speaking about colonization, power, and language. Several times Chomsky makes the point that if Black people today, or perhaps an African tribe, wielded dominant power, African-American English would be the English that we considered standard, the language

continues >

of academia, and all of the other areas where linguistic hierarchy exists. Chomsky points out that the rules of grammar that we have are of course arbitrary, yet we cling to them so tightly and we force children and adolescents to conform to arbitrary measures that are really measures of whiteness.

Session attendees walked away with a series of questions created by Dr. Sarina Molina, Associate Dean and Professor in the Department of Learning and Teaching at the University of San Diego, from an article titled *Reducing Colonial Harm in Language Teaching: A Guide to Critical Self-Reflexive Practices for Language Teachers*.

Dr. Molina encourages readers to participate in critical self-reflection and to examine their English teaching and speaking practices located in three areas: identity, coloniality, and pedagogy.

Having readers first examine themselves allows them to examine their connection to and perpetuation of colonial harm in the pedagogy and in the curriculum. It is also important to note that self-reflection alone is not critical self-reflection. Critical self-reflection requires an explicit focus on the roles that power and privilege play in institutions and systems and a reflection on ways of being and doing.

We know that in Montessori we are not short of opportunities to reflect, but whether we do it or not is another story. Reflection is something we are called to do. However, if it's not critical, we continue to reproduce colonial harm. The notion of coloniality is also crucial because we use and teach English with settler colonial mindsets, mentorship, and socialization.

We took the last portion of the session to choose one of the questions to reflect upon. The act of reflecting in this instance also meant writing down versus just thinking. Attendees were asked to reflect on ways they have been complicit in perpetuating colonial

harm. Questions like these are never easy to ask because they require you to take a look at yourself and ask yourself if your practices align with your beliefs and values. But this is the work of critical reflection or critical self-reflection.

Does this mean I stopped teaching English in my classroom? Am I suggesting that English is not valid? Unfortunately, because of the system and the world that we live in, English is

dominant linguistic mode when the situation seems to require it. So, instead of holding back from teaching your students English, you could create fun and engaging ways to bring multiple Englishes into the classroom.

A video clip from the television series *Abbott Elementary*, set in a Philadelphia public school, gave an example of what this could mean. In it, the teacher gave her students a bridge between tra-

It is also important to note that self-reflection alone is not *critical* self-reflection

most definitely valid, but we need to ask ourselves what language and linguistic practices we are invalidating or affirming on a day-to-day basis. Do we offer gentle correction and affirmation when a parent or a co-worker or a caregiver apologizes for their “poor” or “broken” English? Many people have been made to believe that because they don’t sound a certain way, they are incapable of being valued for their linguistic ability, or being valued in the same way as the person they are apologizing to. When I became a teacher to speakers of other languages, I myself have had to check myself in these areas—there’s that othering “other” again!

The very act of not teaching your students these rules of grammar that they have to engage with would be a disservice to them. But instead of placing those rules of engagement on a pedestal, a better idea would be to acknowledge and bring in linguistic variety.

“Translingualism” comes into play here. Translingualism offers speakers the ability to move between languages as they are speaking instead of “code switching”—choosing to use only the

ditional sight words and Philly slang, valorizing an “other” English in which her students were already fluent. I’m not suggesting that you create a material on your shelf about “slaying” for all of the children in the classroom—or perhaps you could!. But teaching needs to be authentic and that authenticity comes from a place of knowing your children. Teachers have to build meaningful ongoing relationships with children, or those materials will serve as a disingenuous checked item in the culturally responsive box.

Judith Baker, in *Trilingualism*, an essay in Lisa Delpit’s collection *The Skin That We Speak* offers this: “When formal English no longer threatens to demean them, students are more than willing to master it. When teachers understand that they cannot force a language form upon their students, those students are more than willing to acknowledge that being ‘trilingual’—being as proficient in formal English and professional or technical English as they are in their ‘home’ English—can only make them more effective.”

If we welcome other forms of

continues >

speaking, we will be more likely and willing to welcome other forms of language construction. This doesn't mean we say no to teaching English as it is. That would mean we are denying children access to things that would set them up for success in the standardized world. We do, however, release the power and oppression that the English language and its rules wield. If language is thought of and said to

be living, then it only lives because we open space for the way it lives in the experiences of the people who speak... which means everyone.

Jasmine Williams serves as Race and Equity Specialist, Montessori Teacher Residency Instructor, and Coach for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the
PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2023 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector

a poem by Finn Chapman

Attendees definitely left with more questions than they had answers and that's a perfect place to be in. One attendee crafted a poem that captures the tension he felt and is working through.

I teach Language Arts,
what I opined the *art of language*,
and I teach a grammar that holds
the structure of imperialism?

It is a horror I cherish

That gives promises of clarity
but at what cost
and through whose windows

And what are the images
created by my clear syntax
and contrived diction?

What part in this play
of words
should I play?

Making is Knowing

Finn Chapman is the Lead Middle School Teacher at Hilltop Montessori School, a private school in Brattleboro, Vermont.