



You Ain't Gotta Write Like You Speak: Talking White, While Livin' Brown

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by Debra Denise Jenkins

Introduction

"In a crowded room, over the voices of people from many different races, the waitress asks Obama if he wants the change from a twenty dollar bill he'd given her. "Nah, we straight," he replies (Henderson)".

Although Barack Obama publicly used African American English (AAE) to indicate he didn't need his change back, the students of Hearne Elementary and the teachers are far from being straight (being okay). We ain't (aren't) even close to being straight, and it is sad to know this. What can be said for my students? No doubt, there is a large number of students I teach who are not successful with reading and writing and although it ain't gotta (doesn't have to) be that way, it unfortunately is. This curriculum unit will help my students realize that there is a name for what they are doing, codeswitching, as Andrew C. Billings points out in his article. "The acceptance or rejection of Black English (BE) dialect has been a societal dilemma for many decades; numerous studies have convincingly shown that BE speakers are rated as "less credible" than speakers of standard American English (SAE)." ¹ It is not necessarily wrong to speak differently around different people, or in different settings, and after reading essays together, particularly Maxine Hong Kingston's Language and Communication from the Norton Reader, students will understand how a student struggles with being tongue tied, but at the end of the essay she spoke loudly and did not whisper. Students should be cognizant of their audience and be able to adjust quickly and effectively, especially as it pertains to writing in an educational setting. This curriculum unit will show that characters in books and essays, famous people, and college educated people, speak the same as them but they also pay attention to their audience.

Code switching is something that even adults do, but could this be hurting students if it is not talked about with them? Code switching may be defined as the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation. Young argues that instead of promoting one language over the other, to instead use code meshing: blending dos idiomas or copping enough Standard English to really make yo' AAE be Da Bomb (make your AAE great) ² They ain't gotta (don't have to) write like they speak, and I am confident that my students can and will become better writers starting with the unit I will be writing for the Yale National Initiative and teaching in the upcoming school year. As the students and I read essays together and complete peer reviews on their own essays, their writing will flourish. This is the model that was practiced in seminar, which enhanced the writing I completed on my own personal narrative essay. We discussed several essays

from the *Norton Reader* and peer reviewed one essay daily. The writing that my students turn in is cringe-worthy at best and I cannot wait to fix the problem that is hurting the district as a whole.

William Zinsser said it best, "Writers must therefore constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: have I said it: Is it clear to someone encountering it for the first time?"³ My students need to know that their writing should have their voice included in it and that their voice very much depends on the audience for that piece of writing. I do not want my students to give up their identities completely in their writing. I want them to grow from mediocre writers to seasoned writers who write beautifully in spite of how they speak at home or in the presence of their peers. Zinsser also contends, "Unlike medicine or the other sciences, writing has no new discoveries to spring on us."⁴ If there are no new discoveries to be sprung on my students when it comes to writing, then teaching them to use their voice when writing personal narrative essays should come easy; especially when it focuses on how they speak. This curriculum unit will help to establish that even when it is not their best that is being turned in, there is a remedy to help get them to their best. There are activities aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) that will allow for success in the subject of reading and writing and mediocrity will not be so common for my students.

"Since language is so complex a system there is probably no known end to the classifying problems that can be presented to students." says John Dawkins.⁵ According to the article "Linguistics in the Elementary Grades," Dawkins contends that there is a phonological problem and part of speech problem. If by his words, it is a problem then by that same logic one could argue that there is a solution. The reading teacher in me is aware of the benefits of reading and writing being taught cohesively, and this curriculum unit will reflect that sentiment.

This curriculum unit will contain research-based findings that will infuse student talk with student writing, but the final product will be improved student writing. Kristen Hawley Turner's article, "Flipping the Switch", she asked a question. "Is text speak truly a problem, or is its occurrence, as Sterling suggests, an opportunity to teach students about the nature of language?"⁶ I too would like to implement the flip the switch classroom activity into my curriculum unit as a starting point from which the students would begin to think, talk, and engage with how they speak at home versus how they speak at school. More about this activity will be detailed later in the curriculum unit. I want students to actively think about why they may be writing how they speak and who are they writing for. As we discuss the essays whole group I want the students to question who is the intended audience of that author's work.

The curriculum unit in its finality will be one that is packed with strategies that are not only useful to my students, but to anyone who may use the unit with their students, activities that the students will find engaging. The end result will be for students to become better writers and embracing their ways of talking to enhance their writing. I want teachers who plan on teaching this curriculum unit to know, you ain't gotta write like you speak.

Rationale

Back when I was a sophomore in high school, in the district where I currently teach, I recall sitting in a Theater Arts class. At the time I simply wanted an easy course to take, but what I found out some 22 years later was that, it was in that class that I discovered how I would purposefully choose to speak from then until now. We had been asked by the teacher to play a game where we would have to mimic the voice, persona, or character of the person to our left. I grew up in the hood and we spoke differently, very differently from those who did not. We were considered heavy speakers of the dialect known as African American English or AAE. When it was my turn I recall making my voice to sound like the characters from the movie *Clueless* and the class erupting in laughter at my creativity. I began speaking like this as my own discipline of rhetoric, as sort of having an alter ego, but with regards to my own personal dialogue.

After having done this for practically all of my life, especially when answering phone calls, replicating the voice on the other end of the call, and being both publicly and privately praised and ridiculed for it, I have come to find that there is a technical name for this phenomenon. It is referred to as code switching, having a home dialect and the dialect spoken at school. This was especially apparent when I realized also, since becoming a teacher, that I have students who unbeknownst to them, do this all the time as well. For my students it spills over into their academic writing which proves detrimental to the crafting and creating of characters which includes descriptions other than adjectives.

Jessica Brantley showcased in her seminar, "Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay" several qualities good readers should obtain in order to become a good writer. One quality was how reading essays across different genres (memoire, autobiography, personal experience, personal narrative, personal essay, creative nonfiction, personal nonfiction, etc.) would help to mold my very own personal essay; this technique could also translate into my very own classroom with my students. Another thing taken from this seminar was to expose readers (my students) to essays, books, prose that reflects their interests as learners at various levels of difficulty that will undoubtedly prepare them for future challenging texts and writing that will be assigned to them.

The purpose of this unit is not to imply that how these students speak alludes to their competency level nor is it aimed to try to fix the way students speak or to make them feel inferior for how they speak. The purpose of this unit is to connect reading and writing. After exposing students to some of the essays we discussed in seminar, it will enrich students culturally and diversely and inspire student writing, thus improving student writing. Another aspect of this unit will be to prepare students for when they will be writing a personal experience essay and how it is advantageous to write beautifully and creatively for specific audiences. The purpose of this unit is to also empower students by explicitly telling them what code switching is, and to exploit what they unintentionally do, so that their writing is more polished and academically acceptable. Students need to know that code switching is an integral part of my life and theirs, and that it could be viewed as knowing multiple languages. This unit will also teach students that each language (African American English, Spanglish, and Standard American English) has its place and purpose in which the world we live but discernment is definitely required especially when writing personal experience essays. We will read essays (Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tongue Tied*, Richard Rodriguez's *Aria*, Gloria Anzaldua's *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, and Frederick Douglass' *Learning to Read*) in class and will have in depth discussions about word choice, author's purpose, who is the audience intended to be for each essay, and the genre of the essay itself. These essays will be paired with children's picture books, in the way of a paired selection. (*I Love My Hair* by

Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, I Love Saturdays y Domingo by Alma Flor Ada, Big Mama's by Donald Crews, and Tameka's New Dress by Ronnie Sidney II) After class discussions, students will begin to write their own personal narrative essay, which we will then peer review, just as we did in seminar.

Demographics

Hearne Elementary School is located in Hearne, Texas, a town with a population of roughly 5,000 residents. The elementary school, Pre-K through 6th Grade, had 524 students as of the 2017-2018 school year. This campus is 100% free and reduced lunch, 99.8% are considered to be economically disadvantaged, and 64.7% of students being considered at risk of dropping out of school. 21.2% of the students were enrolled in bilingual and English language learning programs. In regards to special programs at the campus, gifted and talented students accounts for 1.7% of the campus (7.9% statewide) while special education accounts for 14.1% (9.1 statewide).

The students who attend school here come from homes that are not traditional in the least. Students come to me two or more grade levels behind and I teach third grade. My students have endured at their ages what some adults have never, and will never experience, which includes but is not limited to: generational poverty and illiteracy, incarceration of one or both parents, absent parents including moms and not just dads, physical/sexual abuse, physical/emotional neglect, and alcohol/substance abuse. Students who receive special education services and their parents did too.

This unit is tailored to serve approximately 50 third grade students who are exposed to code switching all the time, students who will be exposed to mentor texts whose characters parallel their ethnicities, students whose personal experience essays showcase the strengths of code switching.

The Unit

It should take about a full six weeks marking period for this unit to be completed. With the amount of essays and picture books included in the unit, and the writing section, the plan is to finish in six weeks. Two weeks will be devoted to one essay and one picture book and some peer reviewing and editing. Writing takes longer for my students because it is not done daily, but only twice a week. At the end of the unit, students will have had read to them at least three essays and three picture books. They will have written one personal narrative essay that includes all the steps of the writing process as defined by the TEKS.

Content

Throughout the unit, there has been mention of the term “audience” and having the students discuss who the audience is. In seminar, we discussed how an audience is who the essay is written for, or who is the intended reader of the essay. In the 13th Edition of the *Norton Reader*, page xxxii, it explicitly states “Sometimes that audience is a single reader, as in an entry in a private diary; sometimes the audience is national or international, as in an editorial for a newspaper like the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.”⁷ The audience is important for third graders to know because it lends itself to the author’s purpose, which is a TEK addressed in the unit. Oftentimes students struggle with this concept, and it has worked well for me when it is modeled by think aloud a few times first. If there are concerns about students knowing specifically who the intended audience is for an essay or story, the teacher may guide them to the answer, with special care to remember that guided practice is okay, but the end result should be for students to become independent learners and thinkers.

Another thing to consider when teaching this unit is keeping in mind who the author actually is. This is important as it lends itself specifically to the genre of writing the students will be writing on their own. Which brings me to the next point, genre. As discussed in seminar we talked about the different narrative genres of writing. Certain genres follow certain forms, styles, and subjects. The genre of writing the students will be writing for this unit is a literacy narrative. The literacy narrative is a subcategory of the autobiographical essay. The essay the students write will focus on learning to read or learning to write.

- *Autobiographical essay* This genre focuses on a significant experience in a writer’s past and draws out the meaning as the writer tells a story and reflects on the experience.⁸
- *Literacy narrative* A subcategory of the autobiographical essay, the *literacy narrative* focuses on learning to read or write. This genre uses “personal experiences, requires vivid details and a sharp narrative style, and gives a clear indication of the narrative’s significance.”⁹

After researching codeswitching and linguistics, I found that some argue the benefits of it and some argue that it adversely affects student writing. In analyzing the essay during seminar, “Learning to Read” by Frederick Douglass we talked about why Douglass chose to use the words that he did and why his mistress felt compelled to treat him cruelly. As I sat quietly in seminar trying to make sense of it all, I couldn’t help but wonder how his essay may have read or been written if his audience changed. What if perhaps, Douglass wasn’t speaking to college aged persons, but instead to his homeboys? He says on page 348, “In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own;”¹⁰ Part of my research revealed to me that part of my job as a teacher could be to hone in on that skill that the majority of my students possess and exploit it to their benefit. William Brennan, the author of the article, about a speech pathologist, “Julie Washington’s Quest to Get Schools to Respect African American English” feels strongly that helping students switch dialects is how they will become successful. What was eye opening about the article was the science that surrounded it. Julie mentioned, “The experience convinced her that dialect was playing a significant and unrecognized role in the reading achievement of millions of children-and very likely contributing to the persistence of the black-white gap in test scores.”¹¹ The problem or argument that is being made about code switching is that even though there are well intentioned lessons on code switching, it is the linguistic version of “separate but equal”¹² Instead of telling students that it is right or wrong to speak a certain way, simply have students turn and talk

(one of the strategies that will be elaborated more on later in the unit. John Dawkins is a believer in that linguistics, the study of language, can be taught in the early grades.

Another element of code switching that has not yet been mentioned is English-Spanish (Spanglish). Students who code switch in this manner are fusing two languages together by deleting words or phrases in one language and replacing it with the other language. Take for example, the chart that is listed in the article written by Domnita Dumitrescu. She contends that this manner of speaking could be viewed as not being authentic, or mimetic. She goes on to say...

1. The problem

Bilinguals who are able to converse entirely in one or the other of the two languages they speak often switch back and forth between these languages for various social reasons. Many of these language switches occur at sentence boundaries, but others occur in mid-sentence within a smooth stream of speech. Examples of such code-switching between Spanish and English are given in (1) through (7).

1. I put the forks en la mesas. (McClure (1977)) 'I put the forks on the tables.'
2. Todos los Mexicanos were riled up. (Pfaff (1979)) 'All the Mexicans were riled up.'
3. No van a bring it up in the meeting. (Pfaff (1979)) 'They are not going to bring it up in the meeting.'
4. El hombre who saw the accident es Cubano. (Gingras (1974)) 'The man who saw the accident is Cuban.'
5. En Puerto Rico he would say que cortaba cana, even though tenia su negocio, you know. (Sankoff and Poplack (1980)) 'In Puerto Rico he would say that he cut cane even though he has his own business, you know.'
6. La onda is to fight y jambar. (Pfaff (1979)) 'The in-thing is to fight and steal.'
7. Estaba training para pelear. (Pfaff 1979)) 'He was training to fight.' ¹³

When students code switch in this way, perhaps it is simply because they cannot think of the English word or they do not know the translation of the word. The point of code switching in this unit is to bring attention to it, and simply have students recognize that they are doing this (whether intentionally or not) and to show them that book characters do it too. Word choice is important, as we discussed in seminar because it speaks to the author's purpose for writing the essay. This unit will show students how to use their language, to the best of their abilities to improve their writing. Students should have opportunities to speak freely, and in the language they feel most comfortable with.

Maxine Hong Kingston felt most comfortable speaking when reading because she didn't have to think of what she wanted or needed to say. She felt miserable at school when she had to speak, the feeling of misery remained even when she was silent. Imagine the feeling our English learners feel when facing that same reality. It would be huge injustice not to teach this unit, as all students could benefit from it, not just bilingual or monolingual students. Richard Rodriguez, who wrote the essay "Aria" shares that feeling. His concerns were, "Because I wrongly imagined that English was intrinsically a public language and Spanish an intrinsically private one, I easily noted the difference between classroom language and the language of home."¹⁴ When reading this essay to the students, it is important to discuss why the author feels this way and do perhaps they feel that way as well. During seminar, we discussed the author's public point and if an essay should even have one or not. It was agreed that while all essays should have a public point, sometimes that point is not

made very clearly or explicitly stated in the essay. Students could practice searching for the public opinion in the essays discussed whole group, or the children's books that will be paired with the essay.

Strategies

Anchor Charts

When I create anchor charts in my classroom it is to highlight the important elements of the lesson. They help me focus on, and my students to remember the most important concepts and skills that are being taught. The rationale for creating anchor charts is that they improve students' comprehension and are designed to scaffold their learning. There are three specific anchor charts that I will be making for this curriculum unit. I typically use colors and not just black and white to make the anchor charts come alive for the students. A strategy within this strategy is that I make a copy of the anchor chart and give it to the students to put inside of their reading journals. This is done so that if students need to reference it for any reason, it is always accessible them. Sometimes anchor charts get covered up with other anchor charts due to limited wall space inside of the classroom. If an anchor chart is covered up, students always have access to a miniature version of it inside of their reading journal.

1. What is code switching
2. What is narrative writing
3. What is voice

Mentor Texts

When I pull mentor texts into a lesson it is for a very specific purpose. The main one is that my students can return to and reread them for many different purposes and to use as a study guide, not an imitation to copy. The purpose for using mentor texts in this curriculum unit is to help students make powerful language connections to their own lives, to take risks, and to try out new strategies. The books for the unit are always kept at the front of the classroom so students may reread them in their free time, or reference them if they need to.

Turn and Talk

Whenever I have my students engage in this strategy it is strictly to provide oral language support. By doing this, students are able to formulate and share their ideas and their thinking in a low risk setting. When students turn and talk I am always listening two very important things. The first thing I listen for is are the students speaking in complete sentences, and are the students using academic language? If so, publicly acknowledge them (it encourages other students to do so) and if not, model for students that we speak in complete sentences because we read and write in complete sentences. This also allows for students to participate in the classroom discussions without the entire student body listening to them speak, which could prove miserable for some students.

Author Studies

Author studies build critical thinking skills. Students learn to compare and contrast themes, analyze text and

illustrations, and make connections between the author's life and the author's work between their own life, and their own work. I plan on giving the students as much background knowledge on the authors of the essays more so than the picture books because I want them focus on the characteristics of a personal narrative essay. The focus being on that specific genre, because that is the genre of writing the students will do themselves.

Picture Walks

Picture walks can help students connect to the story on a more personal level and by activating prior knowledge. A picture walk is done sitting down. Students "walk" through the pictures verbally. This can be done in small group settings or whole group settings. You can also combine this strategy with turn and talk, by having students turn and talk to their peanut butter and jelly partners (the person who sits next to them) about what pictures they see on the page of the book. This can give students a tool to organize the information in the story, which could increase their comprehension of the story.

Writer's Workshop

This instructional strategy helps students become confident and capable writers. During writer's workshop, students have designated time to work by themselves, with their peers, and to conference with the teacher. They are full engaged in the complete writing process by selecting topics, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing their original work, with a targeted audience in mind.

Appendix Implementing District Standards/Suggested Instructional Sequence

There will be several speaking, reading, and writing Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards that will be key for planning this unit. The speaking and reading TEKS included are 3.1C, 3.1E, 3.6A, 3.6B, 3.6E, and 3.10F. These speaking TEKS are critical to the unit in that it specifically calls for students to speak coherently about the topic, make eye contact, enunciate their words, and develop social communication. This will prove beneficial when having in class, whole group discussions over the essays that we will read together (or I read to them). The reading TEKS addressed will prove beneficial when we also have these in depth in class discussions over those same essays. The students will have to establish a purpose for reading an assigned or self-selected text. Students will also have to generate questions to deepen their understanding of the essays, make connections to personal experiences and ideas in the essays and in the world they live in. When discussing the essays, students will also have make note of the author's use of language and how it contributes to the author's voice. We will also have in class discussions about the language we use at home versus the language we use at school. I will neither promote, defend, nor negate either of those things. As we get further in our in class discussions, I will ask students which they feel is more appropriate in their writing at school and why they feel that way.

The writing TEKS that will be key for planning this unit are 3.11A, 3.11B, 3.11C, 3.11D, and 3.11E. After reading and discussing various essays, students will begin crafting an essay of their own, a personal narrative essay. This will include planning a first draft, developing that piece of writing into an essay that is focused, structured, and coherent. Students will then revise and edit their work, modeling the peer review we used in

seminar, and publish it for an appropriate audience.

This unit will set the tone for how I will teach reading and writing as it will be the expectation of students to read quality work, discuss it whole group, and publish a piece of their own with the help of the teacher and other students peer reviewing their work. I also plan on incorporating games that play with using Standard American English and African American English that will have students discerning between the two dialects.

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