Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom – Part Two*

In the section titled "Language Diversity and Learning," Delpit "[addresses] a board conception of language diversity as it affects the learning environments of linguistically diverse students" (Delpit, p. 49). She also "focuses on the development of the range of linguistic alternatives that students have at their disposal for use in varying settings" (p. 49).

Delpit discusses the research in second-language acquisition in respect to dialects. She describes Stephen Krashen's notion of an "affective filter," which "operates 'when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the second language, or is overanxious about his performance,…[causing] a mental block….[which] will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition'" (Delpit, p. 50; Krashen, 1982).

From a pedagogical perspective, Delpit states, "The so-called affective filter is likely to be raised when the learner is exposed to constant correction" (p. 50).

She says, "Forcing speakers to monitor their language for rules while speaking, typically produces silence" (p. 51).

Delpit cites the importance of teachers recognizing students' dialect when they bring it to the classroom, since it "is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity" (pp. 52-53).

However, "it is equally important to understand that students who do not have access to the politically popular dialect form in this country, that is, Standard English, are less likely to succeed economically than their peers who do" (p. 53).

In order to address this, "[t]eachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context" (p. 53).

Delpit cites Shirley Brice Heath's research in *Way with Words*, stating, "Children can learn that there are many ways of saying the same thing, and that certain contexts suggest particular kinds of linguistic performances" (p. 54).

Delpit also notes that "[t]here are other differences in oral language of which teachers should be aware in a multicultural context, particularly in discourse style and language use" (p. 54).

She cites research that examined the different ways white and black adults responded toward a "black child's story" (p. 54-56). The white adults found the child's telling of the story was "'terrible'" and "'incoherent'" as well as "predicted difficulties" for the child academically (p. 55).

The black adults did not share the same view, though. They found the child's story "'well formed, easy to understand, and interesting, with lots of detail and description'" (p. 55). They did notice "the 'shifts' and 'associations' of 'nonlinear' quality of the story, [but] they did not find these features distracting" (p. 55).

Delpit says, "When differences in narrative style produce differences in interpretation of competence, the pedagogical implications are evident" (p. 55).

Delpit claims, "Thus, if teachers hope to avoid negatively stereotyping the language patterns of their students, it is important that they be encouraged to interact with, and willingly learn from, knowledgeable members of their students' cultural groups" (p. 56).

One thing Delpit notes is from Heath's discovery in her research "that questions were used differently in a southeastern town by young black students and their teachers" (pp. 56-57).

Using “the types of questions asked of the children” that “were more in line with the kinds of questions posed to them in their home settings—questions probing the students’ own analyses and evaluations” they “responded very differently” (pp. 56-57).

In P. H. Cunningham’s research, Delpit states, “[T]hat teachers across the united States were more likely to correct reading miscues that were dialect related” (p. 58).

While Cunningham’s research concluded “that the teachers were acting out of ignorance, not realizing” that black children’s pronunciation of words and phrases had “the same meaning, Delpit retorts, “[I]n my observations of many classrooms, however, I have come to conclude that even when teachers recognize the similarity of meaning, they are likely to correct dialect-related miscues” (p. 58).

Essentially, Delpit promotes pedagogy that does not “correct the student’s dialect-influenced pronunciations and grammar,” since they must “had to have comprehended the sentence in order to translate it into [their] own dialect” (pp. 58-59).

Delpit offers three points for supporting the research for this pedagogical approach. The first is “because children become better readers by having the opportunity to read, the overcorrection exhibited in this lesson means that this child will be less likely to become a fluent reader than other children who are not interrupted so consistently” (p. 59).

The second point Delpit makes is that “a complete focus on code and pronunciation blocks children’s understanding that reading is essentially a meaning-making process” (p. 59).

Finally, she states, “[C]onstant corrections by the teacher are likely to cause the student and others like her to resist reading and resent the teacher” (p. 59).

Delpit cites Robert Berdan’s example of having graduate students read aloud a strange language. She says, “When they made errors he interrupted them, using some of the statements/comments he had heard elementary school teachers routinely make to their students” (p. 60).

Essentially, the graduate students “begin to fidget. They [wadded] up their papers, [bit] their fingernails, [whispered], and some finally [refused] to continue” (p. 60). Delpit’s point was “not to confuse dialect intervention with reading instruction” (p. 60).

Delpit also cites Robert Kaplan’s description of “contrastive rhetoric,” in which “different languages have different rhetorical norms, representing different ways of organizing ideas” (p. 61).

She continues to discuss the various pedagogical approaches on how teachers encourage students to work together in reading and interpreting “‘book language’” and in understanding academic discourse by working in groups and by “[reducing] the meaning to a few sentences (p. 62).

Delpit returns to Heath’s experiences with students in Trackton in the 1970s, referencing the reason for them learning to read was brought on by real world situations (pp. 62-63).

Delpit transitions into addressing Eleanor Wilson Orr’s “[investigation in] the possibility that speaking Black English was preventing these students from excelling in math and science” in her text, *Twice as less: Black English and the performance of black students in mathematics and science* (pp. 63-66).

Delpit identifies three problems with Orr’s position on Black English affecting students ability to learn in school (pp. 64-65). The first problem she states is “[Orr’s] assumption that black students, by virtue of speaking Black English, do not have access to certain concepts needed mathematical problem solving” (p. 64).

The second problem, Delpit claims, [I]s that Orr compares the language and performance of low-income, ill-prepared students with upper-income students who have had superior scholastic preparation" (p. 64).

Delpit states that Orr's "basic problem" is her "apparent belief that somehow mathematics is linked to the syntactical constructions of standard English: '[T]he *grammar* of standard English provides consistently for what is *true mathematically*'" (pp. 64-65).

She disagrees with Orr's approach to "teaching math through the use in instruction of irregular number systems which force students to carefully work out concepts and prevent their dependence on inappropriate rote memorized patterns" (p. 65).

Instead, Delpit suggests teaching mathematical problems with a real-world context (p. 65).

Delpit closes out this section noting the changing demographics in the United States, stating the increase of "nonwhite children in American classroom," and that "all teachers must revel in the diversity of their students and that of the world outside the classroom community" (pp. 66-69).

According to Delpit, if "teachers and students [adopt] a 'mental set for diversity,'" the "classroom can become a laboratory for developing linguistic diversity" (pp. 68-69).

Delpit says, "Rather than think of these diverse students as problems, we can view them instead as resources who can help all of us learn what it feels like to move between cultures and language varieties, and thus perhaps better learn how to become citizens of the global community" (p. 69).

References and further reading

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