



# Working Towards Linguistic Equity: Language Varieties in the English Language Arts Classroom

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# What's It All About?



# Our Time Together

- Situate the study
- Review of Research Questions & Theoretical Framework
- Discussion of Methods
- Presentation of Findings & Implications
- Significance & Future research
- Q & A



# Research Questions

How do teachers understand the role of language as a vehicle for literacy development and text analysis in secondary English classroom?

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence planning and instruction for literacy development in secondary English classroom?

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence how they structure the use of language in the secondary English classroom?

## Theoretical Framework

Schools are Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998).

Secondary literacy students require different strategies due to their unique ways of developing literacy (Alexander, 2003; Chall, 1983).

Language marks identity & is inseparable from culture (Nieto, 2010; Delpit, 2002).

Race is a social construct; racism infiltrates all areas of US society including education (Stefancic & Delgado, 2012).

Culture emerges due to human interaction & is inseparable from language (Carrithers, 1992).

Power is present in every relationship & creates imbalance (Freire, 1921/1970).



# Methodological Approach

- ▶ Analyze the influence of language, culture, and power instructional decision-making through examination of the following data generating methods:
  - ▶ Participant interviews
  - ▶ Participant lesson/task plans
  - ▶ Field notes
- ▶ Rationale:
  - ▶ As Fielding and Fielding (1986) stated, “we should combine theories and methods carefully and purposefully with the intention of adding breadth and depth to our analysis but not for the purpose of pursuing “objective truth,” (p. 33).

# Research Context

## Research Sites

- ▶ 3 Sites:
  - ▶ (1) 6-8 Middle School in the Southern part of the US
  - ▶ (1) 9-12 High School in the Southern part of the US
  - ▶ (1) 9-12 High School in the Southwestern part of the US

## Participants

- ▶ 5 Secondary English teachers
  - ▶ 2 with 1 year's experience
  - ▶ 1 with 2 year's experience
  - ▶ 1 with 6 year's experience
  - ▶ 1 with 18 year's experience
- ▶ Ethnic/Racial Demographics:
  - ▶ 2 self-identify as African American
  - ▶ 3 self-identify as Caucasian



# Data Analysis

## ➤ Lesson/Task Plan: Qualitative Content Analysis:

- Analyzed lesson plans for trends and patterns in language use, evidence of non-dominant culture texts, and areas of congruence and departure from how participants described their lesson planning process (Stemler, 2001; Hsieh & Shannon 2005).

- 3 Sets of Lesson Plans

- 2 Sets of Tasks

## ➤ Participant Interviews:

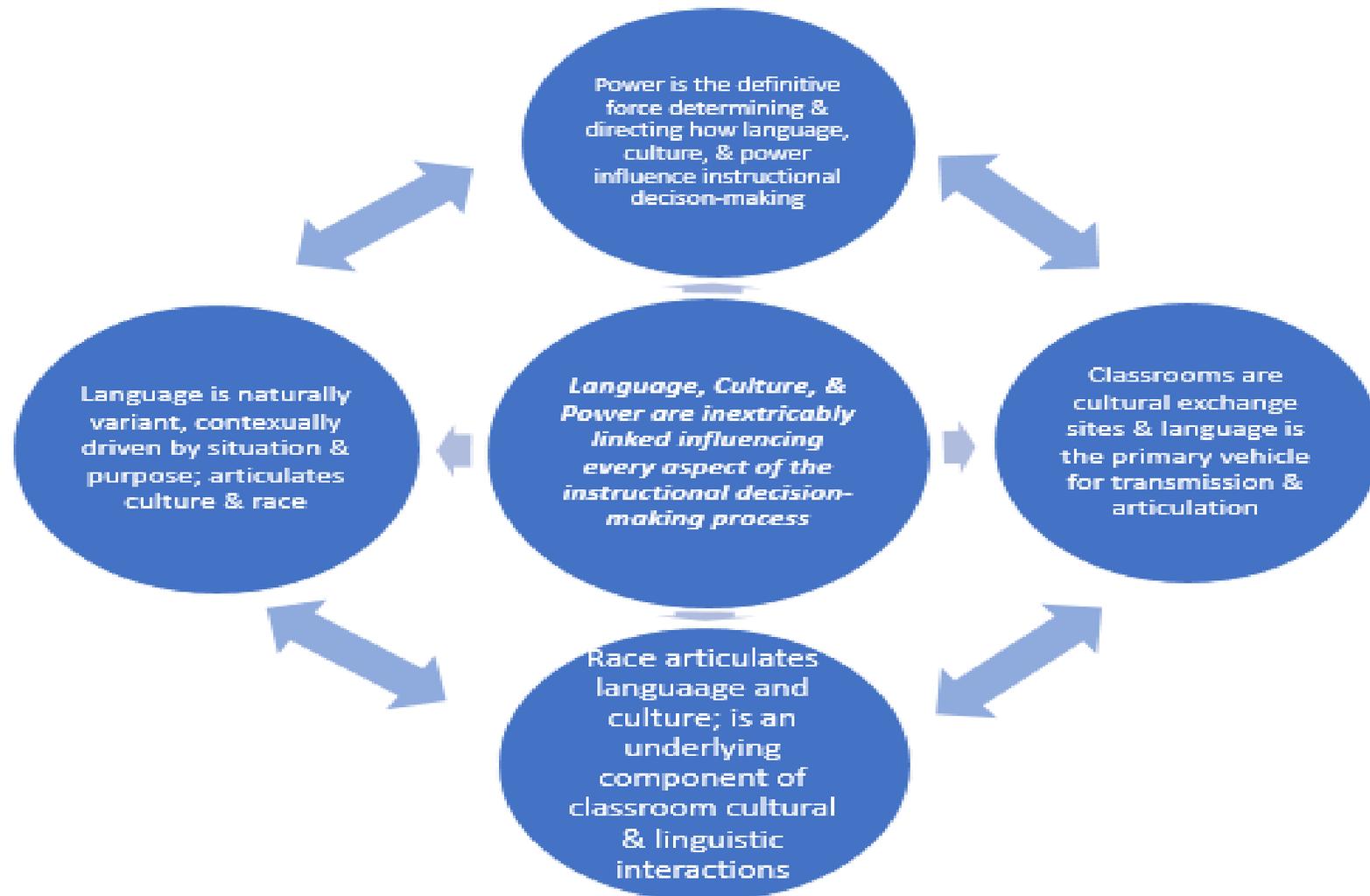
- Interviews provided teachers opportunities to discuss their perspectives on the role of language, culture, and power as factors in their instructional decision-making processes. Interviews also offered an opportunity to inquire into the lived experiences of participants Seidman (2013).

## ➤ Field Notes:

- Field notes, taken during site visits provided an additional layer of knowledge about the role of culture in this environment (Patel, 2016; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012).

# Construct Relationship Model

Figure 1. Construct Relationship Model



# Findings on Language

- **Theme:** Language is naturally variant and contextually driven by situations and purpose.
  - In the classroom this theme connects to Foster's (1995) "tripartite function of teacher language" (p. 129), associated with language for communicating academic functions and/or processes, developing and maintaining relationships, and expressing teacher's attitudes about speech in the classroom
- **Findings:**
  - All participants held similar ideologies about language
  - All participants used *their* language fluidly in their classrooms
  - 4 of 5 participants believed students' should be able to use *their* language fluidly in the classroom

# Participants' Use of Language

## Written Communication

- ▶ “On paper, it’s always what is --- I guess what is considered dominant language. Even in instruction, it’s majority dominant language unless I am uhm --- I guess I am trying --- and I don’t like to use the word trying to relate to them. I’m putting it on and taking it off,” (Erin)
- ▶ “Whenever am I writing directions or lesson planning, I ‘compose’ instead of ‘write’ or use ‘what could you infer instead of what do you think,’ things like that,” (Beth).
- ▶ “**TLW:** Students will begin to use TPCASTT to analyze poetry,” (Marie)
- ▶ *Losing My Cool* by Thomas Chatterton Williams/*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* by Jeff Hobbs. “With these novels, you may want to think about if the protagonist is a juxtaposition of each other (Dawn).”

## Verbal Communication

- ▶ “When we’re talking conversationally, you just use your language. That’s what I like about code switching. I’m not trying to make kids not be who they are..,” (Dawn).
- ▶ “So I talk to them like I would usually talk to any other adult. And if they need me to go back and define, I will...I think that’s really important that they’re getting exposed to other types of vocabulary because there is a place for colloquial language...” (Marie).
- ▶ “I guess I have to say reading the kids. If they ask for clarification and they say “write” then I’ll just say yes...just “write”. I guess I try to pick up on what language they’re using and translate it into what they would best understand,” (Beth).

# Participants' Expectations for Students

- ▶ Participants held flexible and fixed expectations for how students should use language in the classroom.
  - ▶ 4 of 5 participants held flexible expectations, recognizing students' language use would vary for written and verbal expression
    - ▶ Written tasks – formal, discipline-specific language, “professional”
    - ▶ Verbal interaction – *“Let your freak vibe fly,” (Marie)*
  - ▶ Amy held fixed expectations represented by the data point below:
    - ▶ “Well – now when I think about language in terms of *them* it’s literally speaking in proper grammar. So you know I expect them to be speaking formally you know that it’s ---eh....I don’t know how I want to say that ‘cause it’s not formal all the time... I don’t---I don’t want them, like the “we was...” and “they was...” and improper grammar like “mines” drives me nuts and I will correct them *every* single time that they say it and it drives them absolutely nuts...”

# The Cultured Classroom

- **Theme:** Classrooms are cultural exchange sites, in which language shapes identity.
  - Carrithers' (1992) notion of sociality advanced the idea humans have culture because they have history and culture emerges through intersubjectivity.
- **Findings:**
  - All participants defined culture broadly
  - All participants included language as part of their definitions of culture
  - Race had to be specifically named for participants to consider it as part of their definitions of culture
  - Classroom culture characterized as factors of:
    - Accountability
    - Classroom Personality Dependent
    - Environmental & Intellectual Safety
    - Dissonance & Incongruence

# Power Framework

- ▶ **Theme:** Power is an inevitable force governing all aspects of human relationships, especially teachers and students.
- ▶ **Findings:**
  - ▶ All participants held mostly negative perspectives about power
  - ▶ 4 of 5 participants used language to explicitly dissociate from the notion of themselves as having power
    - ▶ “I don’t see myself as having power,” (Dawn)
    - ▶ “I never thought of myself as being powerful or having power,” (Erin)
    - ▶ “I don’t feel like there’s some power I have and they don’t,” (Marie)
    - ▶ “I don’t feel like a leader or boss,” (Beth)
  - ▶ 1 participant acknowledged her power through a control perspective
    - ▶ “Well they know that I’m the one in charge and that they will not overtake this classroom. This is a battle you’re not going to win,” (Amy)

# Inevitable Presence of Race

- ▶ “Being African American, race is always on my mind. It’s a factor in every lesson. It’s a factor every day all day...” Dawn
- ▶ “I’m Black, my kids Black, we Black all the time in my classroom..”  
Erin
- ▶ “I don’t know if you know this but I’m very white um...like especially if we’re talking about being outside. I’ll be like well, I can’t be outside because I’m actually a lobster...” Marie

# Racialized Language

➤ "...this is school and so you should show you're educated. I don't want *them*, like the '**we was**...' and '**they was**...' and improper grammar like '**mines**.'"

Amy

➤ "***I'm not*** going to be saying words like "**mines**" since the word is "mine." ***I'm not*** going to be saying, "**we was**" or "**they was**" 'cause that's improper grammar. It's ***we were***."

Beth

Um...okay...I've been told by other teachers that it's like a cultural thing, but I had not experienced it before. But ***jōn-ning*** --- okay it's ...people tell me and I've heard it's just I don't understand how you can just sit and go back and forth and...I mean I could understand...but not in class please.

# Racialized Teaching – African American Participants

Erin

► I think it's some of it's natural because we're --- I'm from the place where I'm teaching so it's --- we're family. It's like family who I'm talking to and like we have --- their certain language that is particular to [this place] that I have access to and I definitely leverage that and take advantage of it in my classroom.

Dawn

► Being African American, race is always on my mind. It's a factor in every lesson. It's a factor every day all day. With the teaching I'm mindful to make sure that I um...know my place... I want every kid to bring their culture into this classroom, that's why I read diverse texts...I'm open to them. Bring what you bring to here. We're not---no one's an empty slate, I want you to bring that in here...So race and place is in every lesson.

# Racialized Teaching – White Participants

Amy

- I have thought about that and you know especially when I'm saying things like speak with proper grammar because of that sense of self---that sense of identity and their home culture and taking them out of that and especially as a white teacher. I fear that it's just I'm basically saying speak like me but they're looking at a white teacher. And I do wonder about that, but when you're in the work force...when you're sitting in a job interview...when you're applying for your college applications. Is there a white or black there that we're going to be seen. That's a huge---huge question...and I don't know...

Marie

- As a white teacher, I feel like I definitely need to come in and take into account culture and language and all of those things because if I don't look at those and if I pretend they don't exist, then I am not, first of all giving the benefits to my students like they also have a point of view...I'm only teaching dead white authors because those are the classics I'm really just assuming my knowledge is greater than others and that's not right.

# Answering the Research Questions

How do teachers understand the role of language as a vehicle for literacy development and text analysis in secondary English classroom?

- Teachers' conceptual frameworks about language connected to their use of instructional power determine how these students will use language to develop literacy skills and text analysis. This is especially impactful for students of color.

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence planning for literacy when working with high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom?

- When teachers use their instructional power to afford or constrain the way students use their and articulate their culture, they demonstrate an understanding of how power shapes the way language and culture influence instructional decision-making with HA-AA students.

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom?

- When teachers use instructional power to afford or constrain fluid use of language and cultural articulation to shape instructional decision-making, they reveal their ideologies about how these constructs can and/or should influence student learning.

# Answering the Research Questions

How do issues of language, culture, and power influence the instructional planning decisions made by teachers working with high-achieving African American students in the secondary English classroom as they use literacy and informational texts to support literacy development?

- Teachers' conceptual frameworks about language and culture connected to their use of instructional power determines how these constructs influence their instructional decision-making with their HA-AA students.

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence planning and instruction for literacy development in secondary English classroom?

- When teachers use their instructional power to afford or constrain the way students use and articulate their culture through language varieties, they demonstrate an understanding of how power shapes the way language and culture influence literacy development and text analysis.

What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence learning and achievement for high-achieving African American students in a secondary English classroom?

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What does the use of language, culture, and power reveal about a teacher's understanding of how these constructs influence how they structure the use of language in the secondary English classroom?

- When teachers use instructional power to afford or constrain fluid use of language and cultural articulation to shape instructional decision-making, they reveal their ideologies and hidden biases, which influence how students use language and culture to develop literacy and analyze texts.



“Teachers must not merely take courses that tell them how to treat their students as multicultural clients...They must also learn about the brilliance the students bring with them “in their blood.” Until they appreciate the wonders of the culture represented before them...they cannot appreciate the potential of those who sit before, nor can they link their students’ histories and worlds to the subject matter they present in the classroom.”



## Implications – Teacher Educators

- Methods courses must provide multiple opportunities for candidates and those seeking advanced degrees to come to terms with their biases and underlying racist notions about the students they will have the privilege to serve.
- Pre-service English teachers would benefit from courses that allow the study of multicultural curriculum theorists and more diverse resources.
- Build pre-service teachers' knowledge about American English along the following lines:
  - Cultural Concept
  - Product & Tool
  - Language of Power



“Overwhelming inequality will require not only equalizing tangible resources, but also dealing with educators’ view and behaviors, developing environments with strong supports and high expectations, and helping students reconceptualize their possibilities and responsibilities, so that they can commit to themselves and their learning,”



# Implications for Teachers

- ▶ Focus on building literacy skills as opposed to being “married” to texts to get beyond the single story about marginalized people.
  - ▶ To provide students with non-canonical multiculturally-authored texts requires a willingness to believe such texts have a place in an advanced class. It also requires a willingness to actively seek out such texts to place them in students’ hands.
- ▶ Race, cultural difference, and/or language variation are not issues to be dealt with; rather they are components of identity.
  - ▶ Whiteness has as much culture as Blackness
  - ▶ Language unfamiliarity can serve as a tool for learning
  - ▶ Opportunities must exist for teachers to acknowledge, name, and address hidden biases



# Study Significance

- Centers teacher practice, not student circumstance
  - Centers African American student intellect & gets beyond one-third spaces & pathology
  - Raises possibilities for addressing culture and language beyond an “issues” framework
  - Shifts possibilities for how research on African American students can occur
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