Language Learning and the Definition of One's Social, Cultural, and Racial Identity

KHADAR BASHIR-ALI
Abu Dhabi Women's College
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

> *Maria:* Watch yal talkin' bout, a'm Black from ma mama side, and Poto Rican from my daddy side.
>
> *A group of ESL students in the class:* No, Ms. A., she Mexico, she liein ta ya.
>
> *Maria:* Weel, yal go head, n belie whatcha wanna belie, A know whada A am. Yal jus jelous 'cause A be talkin lak everyon n here!
>
> (Exchange between Maria and other ESL students in the class)

■ Immigrants and refugees constitute the majority population of English language learners or English as a second language (ESL) students at K–12 schools in the United States. These groups typically resettle in urban areas and attend urban schools where a large number of African American students enroll. In the schools they are expected to acquire two forms of English: standard academic English (SAE) as used in the classroom and African American vernacular English (AAVE), the socially accepted language spoken by the majority of their school peers. AAVE is also the linguistic and cultural identity marker for African American students who use language as a way to define their common histories and establish a social, cultural, and linguistic allegiance to their group in and outside the school context.

Many ESL newcomers feel pressured to assimilate into the dominant social culture of their schools, causing them to deny their own language and cultural identities (see Cummins 1996; Goto, 1997; Kaser & Short, 1998; Nieto, 2000). For such learners to be admitted into the social milieu of a school, they must first master the social, linguistic, and cultural codes of the dominant group—which exist in a tacit social hierarchy within a school. Often these ESL newcomers are relegated to a subordinate status, partly because they are seen as racially and culturally different, and partly because they do not know the particular choice of words, phrases, and phonological forms that will allow them greater access in the dominant speech community (Alim, 2005; Ogbu, 1987). Kubota (2001) alerts us to the "unwelcoming atmosphere" (p. 31) encountered by ESL learners in urban schools, who are often victims of ridicule because of their "funny accents," their low level of English proficiency, and their dress.

In reaction to this subordinate status, such ESL students may overcompensate by trying to emulate the social, linguistic, and cultural codes of what they perceive to be the dominant group within their particular school. Ibrahim (1999) reports on the desire of young African refugees to emulate the language and style of what he called "Black Stylized English" (BSE) and popular Black culture (p. 351), and Walcott (2003) talks about the notion of the "salability and bankability of Blackness—and therefore its commodification" (p. 139). This notion that popular Black culture has great value among young adults is significant when attempting to understand their behavior, motivations, and identity formation, particularly for those living in urban areas.

This case study investigated a female ESL student from Mexico who went to extreme measures in an attempt to assimilate in the dominant social culture of her school. Although visibly Mexican, Maria (a pseudonym) told everyone she was Black, chose to speak AAVE, and denied all knowledge of her native Spanish language. Despite being in the United States for only 2.5 years, and compared with her ESL peers, Maria was curiously proficient in the use of AAVE and used it both inside and outside the classroom. She also chose to interact exclusively with African American students in and out of the classroom, and demonstrated strong resistance to the SAE taught in the classroom. She engaged in what Fordham and Ogbu (1986) called *oppositional behavior*; that is, she went against the norms of good behavior in the school as a way to access the dominant African American group. In addition, she continuously made fictional claims that she was half Black and half Puerto-Rican.

This investigation hoped to find answers to the following questions: What social and cultural variables forced Maria to negate her own racial and cultural identity and her interpretation of Self in order to be socially accepted by her African American peers? Why was Maria so resistant to acquiring the SAE necessary to achieve future academic success? What common AAVE linguistic forms did Maria use in her spoken English? Of particular interest were the phonological, syntactical, and lexical features unique to AAVE used by Maria.

As a teacher-researcher and a female African American of immigrant origins, my research interest has been to examine how race, racial allegiances, and domination and subordination impact identity and the notion of Self of newly arrived immigrant students. I have been affected by some of the same attitudes toward my own identity, and I wanted to articulate the daily realities of students like Maria in our classes. These newcomer students come with the burden of being different from the mainstream student body and often try to reinvent

themselves to be accepted. I was greatly influenced by Hostetler (2005), who challenges us as educational researchers to be committed to what we do, stating that "it is in the power of every researcher and educator to do something to improve the lives of people" (p. 21). I was particularly interested in investigating this topic because I believe it is our mandate to bring forth the lived experiences of our students, particularly those experiences that might create tensions in us. Race, racial power dynamics, and subsequent conflicts are an unrecognized reality that touches our students deeply. The current study confronts these unnerving situations and prepares us to better serve all of our students.

DATA COLLECTION

The research was a one-year ethnographic case study based on participant observation from a teacher-researcher framework; that is, I was Maria's teacher and a researcher at the same time. The study was conducted for 9 months during the 2003–2004 academic year. Data were collected from interviews with Maria, Maria's speech during informal social interactions, observations of teacher-student classroom interactions, and impromptu and informal talking sessions.

Some of the interviews were structured and some were informal. The structured interviews were conducted by this teacher-researcher, or by one of the participant's friends. Maria's friend was trained to audiotape Maria's speech as she was socializing with African American peers. The structured interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Formal observations were conducted within both content-area and ESL classrooms two or three times a week. Notes were taken at the time of such observations. The informal talking sessions involved interacting with the participant in informal settings such as in the cafeteria, in the school hallways, and while accompanying the participant home from school (after trust was established). Informal observations of the participant's behavior were recorded in a log shortly following key incidents. The intent of these informal talking sessions was to gain the participant's trust. To do this, I needed to relinquish the teacher-researcher's position of power and refrain from passing judgment, adopting instead the role of mentor and confidante.

Data collected were categorized into three major themes: linguistic aspects, sociocultural aspects, and aspects regarding resistance to learning SAE. These themes were chosen because most guiding questions in the interviews centered on the initial research questions.

From the initial analysis, an extra theme emerged from the study: teacher empathy (or lack of empathy) toward ESL students. Categorized data were then analyzed to find trends regarding the research questions.

THE PARTICIPANT

Maria is a 15-year-old ninth grade female student from Mexico. At the time of the study, Maria had been in the United States for 2.5 years with her family. She began attending school in this country in the 7th grade. Maria, the oldest child, takes care of her brothers and sisters after school (only one of her brothers is of school age). At home the family speaks Spanish and neither parent speaks English. For this reason, Maria has had to act as their linguistic caretaker on many occasions and has missed many school days interpreting and translating for them. Since all the neighbors are African American, Maria's friends are also all African American.

THE SETTING

The study is set in a high school located in a city in the Midwestern region of the United States. The majority of the students in the school are African American. As a result, the English language dialect spoken by the majority of students in the school is AAVE. The school employs two ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants. It is located in a working-class community that has some variation in socioeconomic status. Recently, however, a number of refugees from Africa and immigrants have moved to the area. Within a student body of 1,400 students, about 123 are ESL learners from 33 different countries.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

"Dey Are the Cool, I Wanna Be Wi'Dem": The Compelling Need to Fit In

Black popular culture was very strong in the school. All students adopted the same social mannerisms of what they perceived was "cool." These included particular hand signals, head and body movements, and conversational style. All these social rituals and signals conformed to the Black popular culture existing in the greater society. Maria felt

a strong desire to be part of this collective social identity and to establish these common traits shared by the larger group. Doing so made her feel that she had cohesion with her peers.

"Dey are the cool, I wanna be wi'dem," she would often say. This cool factor also had a great influence on her denying her own ethnicity, causing her to argue violently with anybody who claimed she was Mexican. Maria refused to speak her native language in public even if addressed by a teacher. Because all of her friends were African American, she interacted with them exclusively and distanced herself from students of her own Mexican ethnic background. She told everyone she was Black and refused to identify herself with her Mexican compatriots, even denigrating them. When her ESL peers questioned her "wanna-be status," she said, "I am too Black, an nofin ya'll can do to take dat away from me, ya'll jus jelous!" Because of her desperate need to identify herself with the cool African-American students, she also refused to acknowledge she was in the ESL program. The ESL students were at the bottom of the school's social hierarchy and were considered inferior by most students. Maria came late to the ESL class every day and often circulated around until the halls cleared. She did not mind being marked tardy or absent as long as her friends did not see her entering the class. She did not want to be seen as speaking a different language or coming from a foreign country. These facts were evident in the following interview excerpt.

> *Teacher*: So, why did you say you didn't speak Spanish when we first met?
>
> *Maria:* Well, … /pause/ because I really don know, I di'int like cause I got used to it, talkin Spanish a home. Mostly, I be talking English with ma friens, I be used to it, talkin on the phone in English, so … /pause/.
>
> *Teacher:* Why? Do you want be cool?
>
> *Maria:* Yeah [*emphasis*], basically, das it… . [*Smile*] … nobady lak dem ESL students.

In addition, an outward animosity between the majority African-American students and the minority Mexican and other ESL students existed in the school, often leading to violent clashes. This reality also influenced Maria's denial of her racial and cultural identity. She would often say out loud, giggling to her friends, "A hat [hate] dose Mexicans" as Mexican students would go by her and her friends in the lunch line. This outward animosity toward ESL students and using language as a symbol of discrimination and linguistic superiority was also recorded by Baugh (2000) during his school years:

> I was not only insensitive to many of my fellow classmates who were learning English as a new language, I was also occasionally cruel. I found their speech awkward, and their funny accents served as a source of considerable linguistic amusement. In an effort to endear myself to my fellow African Americans I began to mimic the speech of these students who were struggling to learn English; these racist antics were rather pitiful … led to some personal confrontations—many centered on language and my misguided sense of linguistic superiority. (p. 7)

Furthermore, Maria lived in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, and this ethnic and linguistic isolation also influenced her decision to negate her own racial and cultural identity.

"Only Teachas Be Talkn Like Dat": Opposing Linguistic Expectations

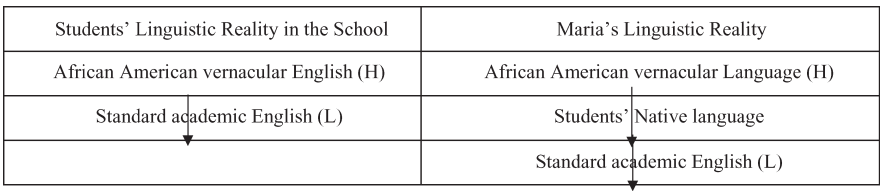
In school, Maria knew that the variation of the English language she had been learning (i.e., AAVE) was not the accepted form of English that teachers use or expect of students in their classrooms. The racial and linguistic reality that dominated the school also affected Maria's lack of motivation to learn SAE. Maria chose AAVE and rejected SAE to avoid the risk of sounding "White." "De teachas be talking funny, dey be talking White," she claimed. This positioning reflects the observation made by Olivo (2003), who argues that the two forms of English, the one spoken inside the classroom mostly by teachers and the one spoken outside the classroom by students, have "a complex relationship rooted in opposing ideologies" (p. 51).

The linguistic hierarchy of the school was such that AAVE was highest. However, in linguistic diglossia, SAE enjoys the high (H) status, while stigmatized variations such as AAVE have a lower (L) status. The language reality of the school is shown in Figure 1, where AAVE has a position of power, along with Maria's own language choices.

AAVE is the predominant social language, used both inside and outside the classroom. The position of power Maria gives to AAVE can

FIGURE 1

Language Reality in the School and Maria's Chosen Linguistic Hierarchy



also be attributed to the status of the hip-hop culture predominant in her school. The language of next importance to Maria is Spanish; she uses it at home with her family on a daily basis. Maria places SAE on the bottom tier. It is the linguistic medium used in her classrooms, usually teacher-directed and monitored. This leads to a perception of SAE as being "uncool" and a threat to her ability to access the dominant social hierarchy of the school. "Nobody laks dem, dey a geeks ya know, lak teachas pet," said Maria of those students in the class who follow the teacher's instructions and who do their work.

Furthermore, Maria did not see any value in learning SAE. Her immediate need as a ninth grade ESL student in a predominantly African-American urban high school was to be accepted and to belong.

MARIA'S LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

An analysis of Maria's speech was made by determining the absence or presence of linguistic features common to AAVE speakers, as indicated by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) and Fasold (1984). Figure 2 shows the phonological, grammatical, and lexical features specific to AAVE found in Maria's speech.

Many of these phonological, grammatical, and lexical features are demonstrated in the following excerpt of an interview with Maria:

> "Ha, ma name is … Am fiteen years old, Am in the nif grade, am a freshmin at N.H.S. Uhm, /pause/ de tinks dat make me happy is like when I git to join everybody, and /pause/ when I go where I git to go, when I wanna

FIGURE 2
Sample AAVE Linguistic Features in Maria's Speech

Phonological features	cluster reductions	*[f]* for *[th]: nif* for *nineth*	*[t]* for *[th]: tink* for *think*	*git* for *get*
Grammatical features	Copula absence of the *(be)* form: *'cause she ma bes frien or she movin'*	No subject-verb agreement: *we was talkin*	Use of the habitual *(be)*: *dey be sayin stuff 'bout me, dey be talkin*	Use of the double negative: *di'in do nofin*
Lexical features	discourse markers	*Ya know*	*Word!* As in agreement	*Das it!*

> go where I git to chill wit 'em or go to the movies, some happy tink like dat [*smile*]. De tink that get me mad is when I git pisst at somebody when like I /pause/ like when Am in school, like dey talk to me and dat git me mad when dey talk too much, dey always be talking 'bout somebody!"

The authenticity of Maria's AAVE was further validated by her peers, who believed her claims of being an African American of mixed race. This is an impressive achievement for a second language learner, considering AAVE's highly sophisticated and complex linguistic features (Baugh, 2000; Fasold, 1984; Labov, 1972; Lippi-Green, 1997; Morgan, 2002; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998). In addition, acceptance by her peers would indicate that Maria had also mastered sophisticated social meanings based on direct and indirect speech, such as the use of double entendres for the purpose of mockery (Morgan, 2002).

Maria had a strong desire to be identified as an African American. She tried everything in her power to adopt and adhere to the linguistic and cultural mannerism of the African- American students so that she could, first, pass as one of them, and second, be recognized and enjoy all the privileges that come with being with the cool groups of the school. Her main objective was to fit in and belong, not to be different (Nieto, 2000). Her academic performance in the school was not at all relevant to her. She would often make fun of other ESL students who applied themselves in class and would ridicule them or call them names.

TEACHERS' LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

One theme that repeatedly emerged from my observations was an overall lack of empathy among teachers for newcomer ESL students like Maria and a lack of pedagogical skills to be able to meet these students' needs. This lack of understanding was more prevalent among content-area teachers who did not know how to meet the academic needs of students like Maria. "She is not in class most of the time. I guess she will fail the quarter," said one science teacher who came to my ESL room to complain about Maria and her absence rate. It did not occur to him that Maria was frequently absent from his science class consisting of mostly ESL students because she did not want to be labeled as an ESL student. Maria had to keep up appearances with the dominant social group in the school and could not risk being found in the ESL class.

This teacher's lack of understanding could be partly attributed to a lack of understanding of the social, racial, cultural, and linguistic aspects that shape students' identities within the school. To be part of the dominant social group in their school, linguistic minority students

may go to great lengths to hide their true identity. For many high school students, being part of the social life of the school is very important.

It can be challenging to understand why ESL students like Maria would want to learn and interact solely using the dominant social language of their school and reject any chance of academic success by refusing to acquire SAE. However, for learners like Maria, achieving academic success is tantamount to being viewed as a "geek," a "teacher's pet," "acting White" and "uncool." Therefore, she is highly motivated not to sound like teachers and to be seen as openly rejecting their authority (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Many teachers also lack awareness that there exists a constant linguistic power struggle between young learners using the dominant social language of the school and their own demand that all students speak SAE. As a result, an antagonistic power struggle often arises when teachers attempt to force corrections on students by claiming they are not speaking so-called proper English. This linguistic power struggle is not new, as can be seen from the following excerpt from Baugh (2000) describing his experience as a youngster in school more than 35 years ago:

> The teacher, a middle aged white man, overheard me "badmouthing" Carlos.
>
> Teacher: John, stop it.
>
> JB: Hey man! He's hitting me. I ain't doing nothing.
>
> Teacher: You are making fun of him.
>
> JB: Yeah, but he's hitting me, I'm just talking.
>
> Teacher: But you're making fun of the way he talks, so stop it.
>
> JB: (shucking and jiving in my best rendition of exaggerated Standard English) I'm very sorry, I didn't realize I was doing anything wrong.
>
> Teacher: Now, John, why don't you speak that way all of the time and improve yourself?
>
> The teacher failed to realize what my black peers sensed immediately; namely my rendition of Standard English was an overt attempt to mock the teacher and Standard English with one blow (p. 9).

In Maria's school, many teachers are also not aware of their students' background, and most of them do not make the effort to find out the personal histories of ESL students in mainstream classes. In addition, they seem to lack knowledge of the diversity of linguistic minorities that exist within their school (Banks, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1995). This lack of knowledge was made clear when one

teacher in a former middle school who was visiting my ESL classroom said, "What is that Caucasian student doing in this class?" (pointing to a young female student from Kosovo). The teacher failed to understand that the ESL classroom is not just for students of color. Content-area teachers, who are often not given the necessary training, are increasingly being expected to meet the needs of the second language learners who are placed in mainstream classrooms. There is increasing need for such teachers to receive training that leads to greater understanding of multicultural diversity (Nieto, 2000; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). In the school district where this study was conducted, such professional development opportunities are offered but remain optional and are attended by few.

CONCLUSION

Maria felt a strong desire to be part of the collective social identity in the school. She did so by adopting the common linguistic and social traits shared by the dominant African- American social group of the school. The study indicates that teachers should be aware that linguistic minority students may go to great lengths to hide their true identity, so as to become part of what they perceive to be the crucial center of power. The racial, linguistic, and social realities in the school affected Maria's motivation to learn SAE for academic purposes. SAE was the least valuable language to Maria, and her priority was not to be academically successful but to be socially accepted and included within the social sphere that dominated the school. Teachers need to understand the social motivations that affect the racial and linguistic identities of ESL students like Maria, students who want to learn and interact solely using the dominant social language, while resisting acquisition of SAE. I agree with Nieto (2000), who stated that "the negative peer pressure to which most students are subjected can be very difficult to resist" (p. 203). This is also very true of newcomer students like Maria, who want to fit in at any cost. Teachers must also consider the consequences of using their position of authority when they attempt to impose SAE and its social norms on students. Further research is needed in this area to investigate ways that would make SAE more acceptable and relevant to students (not only ESL learners) in these urban schools. To gain greater empathy for these students, teachers must attempt to understand their personal, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds by making the effort to find out the personal histories of ESL students in their mainstream classes as well as these students' relationships with peers in the school community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Rachel Grant, Awad Ibrahim, and Brian Nielsen who provided me with useful feedback numerous times in the revision process. I am also grateful to the guest editors of this special issue, who believed in me and in my message.

THE AUTHOR

Khadar Bashir-Ali is a veteran foreign and second language teacher in urban schools in the Midwestern United States. She has worked as a mentor teacher, student teacher supervisor, and university teacher trainer. Her research interests include linguistic access, educational equality, and social justice for newly arrived ESL students. She currently works at the Abu Dhabi Women's College, United Arab Emirates, where she trains preservice EFL teachers.

REFERENCES

Alim, H. S. (2005). Critical language awareness in the United States: Revisiting issues and revising pedagogies in a resegregated society. *Educational Researcher*, *34*, 24–31.

Banks, J. (1997). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Baugh, J. (2000). *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic pride and racial prejudice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Fasold, R. (1984). *The sociolinguistics of language*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of acting white. *The Urban Review*, *18*, 176–206.

Goto, S. T. (1997). Nerds, normal people, and homeboys: Accommodation and resistance among Chinese American students. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *28*, 70–84.

Hostetler, K. (2005). What is "good" education research? *Educational Researcher*, *34*, 16–21.

Ibrahim, A. (1999). Becoming Black: Rap and hip-hop, race, gender, identity, and the politics of ESL learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, *33*, 349–369.

Kaser, S., & Short, K. (1998). Exploring culture through children's connections. *Language Arts*, *47*, 185–192.

Kubota, R. (2001). Discursive construction of the images of U.S. classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, *35*, 9–38.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent*. New York: Routledge.

Morgan, M. (2002). *Language, discourse and power in African American culture*. Cambridge: England Cambridge University Press.

Nieto. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. New York: Longman.

Ogbu, J. (1987). Variability in minority school performance: A problem in search of an explanation. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *18*, 321–334.

Olivo, W. (2003). "Quit talking and learn English": Conflicting language ideologies in an ESL classroom. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *34*, 50–71.

Sleeter, C. (1995). Teaching Whites about racism. In R. Martin. (Ed.), *Practicing what we teach: Confronting diversity in teacher education.* (pp. 117–130). Albany, NY: State University of New York.
Walcott, R. (2003). The struggle for happiness: Commodified Black masculinities, vernacular culture, and homoerotic desires. In P. Trifonas. (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change* (pp. 137–154). New York: Routledge.
Wolfram, W., & Schilling-Estes, N. (1998). *American English.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Youngs, S. C., & Youngs, G. A. (2001). Predictors of mainstream teachers' attitudes toward ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, *35*, 97–120.