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Book Review Section:

Outside our own Backyard: Can Black English studies inform the teaching of English as a Foreign Language?

Keith Gilyard. *Voices of the self: A study of language competence*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

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Voices of the self, Keith Gilyard's look at schooling of African-American children in the United States through the lens of sociolinguistic theory and his own educational experiences, is intended for educators and parents involved with the education of African-American students. But, as the title of this review suggests, Gilyard's work is also of interest to educators whose students' first language is neither "Black English" nor "Standard English." It offers those of us who teach English as a Second Language insight into the question "What English do we teach?"

In the introduction, Gilyard reveals that later in life as a father-to-be he began rethinking his own education in New York City schools. The decision to add subsequent chapters on theory came as a result of his graduate studies in sociolinguistics and experiences as a college professor. The autobiographical chapters deal mainly with Gilyard's life in family and community (Harlem and Queens) and his experiences as one of the few African-American students in advanced placement programs throughout his education. The chapters on theory bring together the ideas of educators, historians and linguists in support of the "pluralist" position on the role of "Black English" in schooling; that this dialect, as the native speech of many African-Americans, ought to be used as a language of instruction together with Standard English.

What do Black English studies have to do with English language teaching in Mexico? After all, Black English is a variety of English although not the variety honored as "standard". As such, it's far more similar to standard English

than it is different from it and closer to it in all ways than a separate language like Spanish. Having read Gilyard's book, I think there are three ways that Black English studies can be useful to the EFL teacher: They help us answer the questions "What English do we teach?" and "What do we, as English teachers, do when our students bring non-standard forms into the classroom?" Finally, Black English studies remind us that education and language teaching in particular are broad areas which require practitioners to take ideas from a diversity of disciplines.

Most language programs teaching English to speakers of other languages aim to teach Standard English. Despite the fact that people learn English for different reasons (employment training, school requirements, etc.) and in a variety of contexts (public and private schools, intensive language programs, ESP classes, etc.), Standard English remains the largely unquestioned target (Goldstein 1987). Certainly, where English is taught as a foreign language, this is a less politically-charged issue than it is in the U.S. and other ESL contexts. It can be reasonably argued, I think, that standard English is most appropriate given the future needs of our EFL students. Mastery of the standard dialect(s) of English, not Black English, is what our students need to pass standardized tests like the TOEFL, Michigan Test, and Cambridge Series. But, as those of us who use authentic audio and video materials can attest, not all native and proficient speakers of English use standard English all the time. As language teachers, we need to be honest with our students about the diversity of English.

As Goldstein (1987) discovered, second language learners are often aware of several varieties of English, and display a range of attitudes toward these varieties. Again, while this may be less of an issue for teachers here in Mexico where only a minority of students have regular contact with native or proficient speakers outside the language classroom. we might well argue that it is even more important where non-standard forms (via popular media such as movies, television programs and music) constitute a relatively large portion of English input. Can we afford to ignore these sources of "English input" our students do receive, simply because they are not Standard English? In discussing this question, Gilyard reminds us that it has too often been assumed in the U.S. that African-American children have weak English skills because they start school speaking a non-standard dialect. How should language teachers handle situations in which students know and use non-standard forms? Should we admire and encourage students for their resourcefulness and awareness as language learners? Should we respond by correcting or asking for rephrasing in Standard English? What attitudes and strategies should we adopt toward non-standard varieties and forms of English within the EFL classroom?

Because *Voices of the self* is not aimed at ESL/EFL students, Gilyard does not address the above questions directly. Nevertheless, the advice he offers teachers of African-American students also has merit here:

The proposal is not to ignore Standard English. One would certainly teach all children to read it. But beyond that, the feeling is that in a more equitable societal arrangement or in a sub-environment pursuing that goal,...students will be not only more inclined to see the value of expanding their productive communicative repertoires, but prove rather skillful at accomplishing the task. (p. 73)

In other words, teachers should respect and make use of the types of language students discover outside the language classroom, while teaching them specific skills in Standard English.

Although Black English studies may not appear to have much in common with the teaching of English as a foreign language, *Voices of the self* makes clear some interesting connections between the two. As relatively new fields, both are characterized by a willingness to look to other disciplines. Indeed, Gilyard uses research from Second Language Acquisition studies and TESOL in his conception of language competence suggesting that we may gain from exploring work done on Black English and its speakers. One of the strongest points about the field of TESOL has been its ability to look outside itself. *Voices of the self* offers a well-written and persuasive argument for utilizing non-standard dialects of English in our classrooms, and demonstrates the potential of a multidisciplinary approach to research in educational settings. English language teachers would do well to read this book.

Bibliography

Goldstein, Lynn. 1987. Standard English: The only target for nonnative speakers of English? TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 3. September. pp. 417-436.