The instructor said,  
"Go home and write  
a page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you—  
Then, it will be true.

I am twenty-two, colored born in Winston Salem.  
I went to school there, then Durham, then here  
to this college on the hill above Harlem.  
I am the only colored student in my class.

So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.

Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"

This poem by Langston Hughes written decades ago has a currency that suggests it could have been penned last week.  
The two experiences, the two voices — black and white —  
inhabit along with many others common space in many classrooms.

There is no question that, as Geneva Smitherman (1977) emphasizes, speakers and writers of Black English can effectively express their hopes, dreams, fears and goals. The strength of this dialect, however, has not led to its acceptance as a legitimate means of communication in many settings. Faced with negative responses to the way they speak and write, African American students who are inspired to acquire skills in standard English precariously straddle two distinct and sometimes hostile worlds.

The following essay, written by my student Michael Jackson when he was an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma, makes vivid the conflict faced by students whose primary language is Black English. Michael’s firsthand account of the feelings of alienation and oppression challenges us all to find ways to teach communication skills in ways that do not devalue our students.

To understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which it occurs — the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit it. The canonical orientation discourages deep analysis of the way these forces may be affecting performance.

— Mike Rose, Lives on the Boundary, p. 237

Ghetto Ease came natural to me. I was taught this from the moment I was born. In my household and around my friends this was how we talked; likewise we thought everyone talked like we did. I didn’t realize people spoke any differently; not until I started school did I first realize the difference between the language of the Ghetto Ease and the “American language.”

It was like I was a foreigner when I started school and I had to learn a new language. The phrases teachers used were different from what I used. For example I would say "Me and him went fishing” and the teachers would correct me saying “He and I went fishing.” I felt embarrassed at first because in a sense we were saying the same thing, but they were pushing my language to the side like it was uncivilized. I became
silent in class afraid to speak. I was afraid I would say the wrong thing. As soon as I got on the bus or around my friends I relaxed and started talking again because I felt comfortable speaking in my own private language of Ghetto Ease. Sometimes the bus driver would tell me to be quiet, in class the teacher told me to talk. In a sense this made me two different people at home and around friends I was very talkative and at school I was the quiet one who always sat in the back.

I can recall a specific event when I realized that my language was different from whites. The event happened when this boy “got in my face” and passed gas. I stomped a “mudhole” in this boy. The teachers sent us to the office to be punished where the principal asked me why we were fighting. I said “Because he lost his manners in my face.” The principal responded, “That’s no reason to fight someone.” I thought to myself, I don’t know where she came from but where I come from we don’t play that. Then it dawned on me she didn’t understand what I was talking about. I didn’t want to say the word fart because when I was at home I’d get in trouble and I didn’t know if I could say it in front of her. I realized right then we were on two different levels. I felt bad because I couldn’t express myself to her; I was only in the second grade.

As I got older and further in school I learned I had a handicap; I spoke Ghetto Ease. Whenever I wrote in another language from the one I spoke in, my papers weren’t that good because I didn’t know how to tell a story using their words and phrases; I didn’t feel free when I wrote. If I could have written my papers using Ghetto Ease, I think they would have been a lot better because I could have written more freely. I wasn’t allowed to practice my language, the language I was comfortable with, the language I talk in around the house, the language I listen to in my music, the language I talk to my friends in. Therefore, I was a poor student in English. I think that’s why the majority of white students did better in English than me because they grew up talking like this so it wasn’t new to them. The things I thought sounded stupid sounded good to them.

This raises some questions. Why should we as “American Blacks” be forced to change our language in order to be considered educated? Is our language really that hard to understand? Or is it just politics? I think that this proves this world is influenced largely by the White race. If they came into my neighborhood talk-

In the past I thought that putting down Ghetto Ease was a conspiracy to make Black people look bad. In a sense it’s not a conspiracy because it’s done in the open. They make us express ourselves in their language, something we are not that familiar with. Then they want to label us slow learners, because we can’t master their language. They just want to “Whiten Us,” make us forget our culture, and where we come from.

Now I know two languages so I know what’s going on in the Hood and I know what’s going on in the World. I still speak Ghetto Ease today when chillin’ with my friends. It’s like our relaxed language where we understand what’s going on. If you can’t speak Ghetto Ease we don’t hang with you in the Hood because you wouldn’t understand.

As soon as I go to class it’s back to the “American Way.” I think one day when we get rid of the attitude Superior and Inferior our language will be accepted as civilized. Then we will be truly equal, both languages accepted and freedom to travel back and forth from one to the other.

References


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