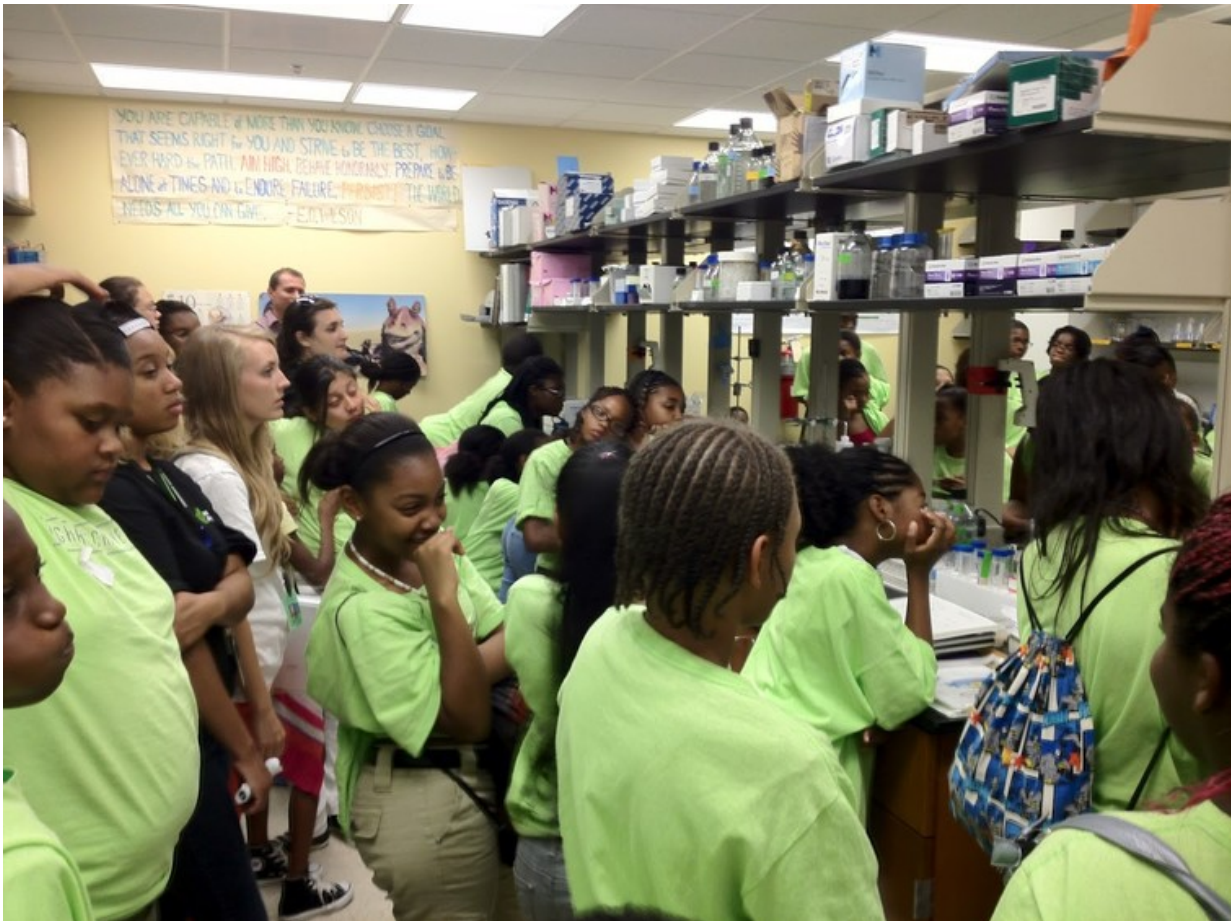


The sound of inclusion—why teachers' words matter

April 11 2017, by Christine Mallinson And Anne Charity Hudley



Students from Higher Achievement (Richmond) tour the biology labs at William & Mary. Credit: Anne Charity Hudley, Author provided

There isn't just one way to sound like a scientist, or to sound like a scholar. Scientists and scholars come from a wide variety of backgrounds and speak in different ways, in different accents, dialects and languages.

In classrooms across the U.S., students do too. No [student](#) (or teacher) leaves their language patterns at the door when they enter a classroom – even classes like math and science, where language is often seen as secondary.

For the past decade, as professors who study the role of language and culture in education, we've been working to help educators understand these dynamics across all subject areas. As the U.S. student population continues to [rapidly diversify along cultural and linguistic lines](#), the demographics of the teacher population remain stable at [roughly 82 percent white and predominantly female](#).

How can educators make sure that teaching and learning in their diverse classrooms is effective and equitable?

Understanding how and why culture and communication matter in all areas of education – [from science to the humanities](#) – is a critical starting point.

When students don't sound the same

Students who speak differently can face a number of challenges at school.

Studies have found that at all levels of education, instructors often [favor students who sound like themselves](#) and can be biased against those who don't. Educators might form negative assumptions about a student's intelligence and ability based simply on how he or she talks, which can

result in [lowered expectations, stereotyping and discrimination](#). Teachers sometimes also send messages, whether consciously or unconsciously, that a student's language is [wrong, dumb or out of place](#) at school.

For instance, consider what one mother told us about an interaction she witnessed in her son's first grade classroom. One of the boys, who is African-American, was playing a game and realized he didn't have the materials he needed. He raised his hand and said to the teacher, "I don't got no dice." His teacher immediately responded, "Joshua, we speak English in this class!" The mother was appalled and felt that this experience could discourage Joshua from speaking up at school.

When students absorb and internalize such messages, they can experience what linguist [William Labov](#) called "[linguistic insecurity](#)" – feelings of anxiety and apprehension that can take root even at an early age.

These negative experiences with language and communication in the classroom can have a direct impact on students' academic achievement. As early as kindergarten, students who come to school speaking in similar ways as their teachers are more likely to get ahead, whereas those who speak differently are [more likely to fall behind](#). These language-based educational inequalities [disproportionately affect](#) African-American students and other students of color, English language learners and students who come from a social class or regional background that is different from that of their teacher.

As Joshua's mother said to us, "There must be a better way to respond."

Putting language into the equation

For the past decade, we've worked not only as [scholars](#) but as [teacher trainers](#) as well. Some of our professional development workshops are

geared toward a particular group of educators: those who teach K-12 science, technology, engineering and mathematics, also known as STEM.

In 2011, we began a [three-year study](#) with 60 K-12 STEM educators in Maryland and Virginia to explore how language can affect teaching and learning for STEM students, particularly for African-American youth. The teachers were eager to learn, but also to share experiences from their own classroom teaching about [the role that language can play in STEM](#) – whether it's answering a word problem in math, reading an engineering text or writing a lab report.

One of the biggest challenges is that, in STEM, word problems, questions, texts and directions often contain unfamiliar terms, both technical and nontechnical. In fact, nontechnical words can [often be as problematic](#) as the more specialist terms of science. "It's kind of like learning a language twice," a geometry teacher said, because "the vocabulary can be so intense."

And it's not just vocabulary that matters; everyday classroom communication plays an important role, too. "We all use language," one STEM teacher recognized, "whether it's in the directions we give or the handouts we use."

What can we do right now?

How can teachers make an immediate difference in their classes? For educators who want to know how to take this information and apply it directly to their teaching, there are relevant, accessible materials.

[The Language and Life Project](#), out of North Carolina State University, hosts a number of videos and podcasts about language.

In addition to [a comprehensive website](#), we created a series of [webinars](#)

about the role of language in teaching and learning across the disciplines, as well as a [podcast](#) in which educators themselves describe how this information positively impacted their teaching and their relationships with students.

These materials can help teachers learn how to respond to students who speak differently, avoid cultural and linguistic bias on tests and design culturally supportive curricula.

In the course of our research, we also created a free iOS app ("[Valuable Voices](#)") for educators. The app provides a year of monthly classroom-ready exercises and activities, adaptable for elementary through [high school students](#). One exercise introduces students to the concept of language change by analyzing the linguistic innovations of William Shakespeare. Another activity invites students to explore "linguistic landscapes," or the language found in public places and spaces around them.

Language matters

Good teaching relies on effective communication, whether it's in English class, biology class or any subject in between. The words that teachers and students use, their meanings and their intentions are [central to classroom interactions and dynamics](#). Ensuring that students, peers and teachers from diverse backgrounds understand and communicate respectfully with each other is often just as important as helping students understand the material in their textbooks.

Language matters – not just for fostering mutual respect, but for making sure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed.

As one high school algebra [teacher](#) who participated in our study pointed out:

"Spending time showing students how their [language](#) is respected, and allowing them to have the skills to analyze different ways of speaking and writing, creates a classroom where we celebrate what we can each bring to our learning environment."

Simply put, she said, "It's worth our time."

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