

Know Your Terms: Code Switching



code switching

(noun) the practice of changing one's language, dialect or speaking style to better fit one's environment.

Overview

When you talk to your closest friends, you probably sound a little different than you do when you talk to your boss. You have learned that in order to communicate effectively, you need to **code switch** to fit different audiences. Here are some other examples:

- * People who speak two languages often code switch right in the middle of a sentence, popping in a few words from their first language for a variety of reasons: Limited vocabulary in the second language may be one, but more often, the switch happens as a way of signaling membership in a group.

- * Many people who speak in nonstandard or dialectal English with family and friends — such as [African-American Vernacular English](#) (AAVE, the preferred term for what

some refer to as “Ebonics”) or [Southern American English](#) — may have learned to code-switch to a more standard form of English in formal or academic settings.

* Barack Obama has been criticized for speaking with a more pronounced dialect when he talks to all-black audiences, but a closer look at his and other politicians’ speaking styles shows [a pattern of code switching with variety of audiences](#).

What Teachers Need to Know About Code Switching

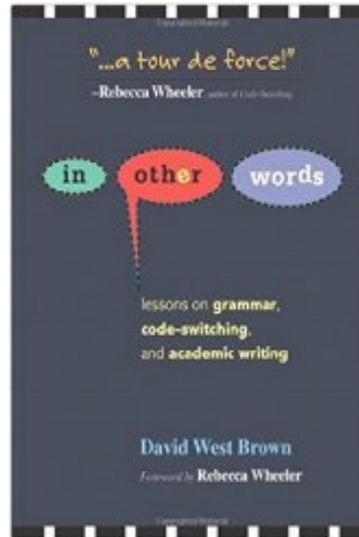
Teachers should know that when they want to teach students how to use standard English, [correcting non-standard English has been found to be ineffective](#). In other words, treating the features of nonstandard dialects as if they are “errors” does not necessarily result in that student regularly speaking or writing in standard English.

Why? Because most of these dialects have their own consistent grammatical rules, and students who speak in these dialects are following those rules. To be told their language use is incorrect makes no logical sense: They are correctly using the features of another language.

This does not mean teachers should ignore non-standard English in their classrooms. It means there are more effective ways to teach academically appropriate language. In their book, *Code-Switching Lessons: Grammar Strategies for Linguistically Diverse Writers*, Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords summarize the research behind this. Instead of correcting these other kinds of dialects as *wrong*, we need to be teaching students about when they are appropriate and when other “languages” would work better.

A two-part strategy has been found to be more effective than “correcting” the nonstandard language: First, *contrast analysis* lessons have students compare the features of their community English to parallel features in formal English. This process is a more linguistic approach, similar to what would happen in a foreign language classroom. Once students develop the ability to recognize the differences between their home dialect and formal English, they can then practice code switching — using the appropriate language in the appropriate context at the appropriate time. Instead of looking at one language form as “correct” and another as “incorrect,” these lessons address the differences in terms of what is going to be most effective in which context.

Further Reading



[In Other Words: Lessons on Grammar, Code-Switching, and Academic Writing](#)

(2009) by David W. Brown

Although I have not yet read it, this book looks like a good one on the subject, because it contains specific code switching lessons, and its approach is in line with the research on the most effective way to address language diversity. Offering 35 "detailed, practical, and sensitive lessons using examples drawn from commonly taught literature and from popular culture," the book will help you show students how and when to code switch, with a focus on academic language. Reproducible student handouts are included.



Launched in April 2013, this blog is written by a team of people "fascinated by the overlapping themes of race, ethnicity and culture, how these things play out in our lives, and how all of this is shifting." The blog is updated daily, and discusses topics that include but are not limited to code switching. In this 2013 [article](#), Eric Deggans describes his own experience coming to terms with code switching.



In this interview, educator Lisa Delpit advocates for empowering children from low-income communities by arming them with the tools to thrive in academic environments. She talks about the way many teachers view students whose “first language” is nonstandard: “The problem is that it’s not viewed as intelligent but as evidence of deprivation,” she says. “It should be looked at as the intelligence of a child learning from his or her environment in the same way a child from a college-educated family would.” ♦

Reference:

Wheeler, R. & Swords, R. (2010). *Code-switching lessons: Grammar strategies for linguistically diverse writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Know Your Terms is our effort to build a user-friendly knowledge base of terms every educator should know. New items will be added on an ongoing basis. If you heard some term at a PD and didn't want to look like a moron by admitting you didn't know what it meant, send it to us via the [contact](#) form and we'll research it for you. And we promise not to tell anyone you sent it: You can totally act like you knew what it meant all along.