

Ebony: Speaker of Black English

I grew up in North Carolina and I lived in the country with very country people. Black people lived over here and White people lived over there. It was very separate. The schools were not integrated yet. I went to a Black school. I was happy. Everybody spoke like me. Everybody looked like me. Then we integrated. After we integrated, they separated some of the Black kids. Some of the Black kids were in all-Black classes and some of the Black kids (a few of us) were with the White kids.

I can't remember the grade that this happened in, but I remember that I was very small. I had a White teacher and I was one of the two Blacks in the class. I was very quiet. She would make me talk and I didn't want to talk, because most of my people—Blacks—were in another class. I just felt intimidated. I felt like she really didn't like me anyway, because I was Black. I was very smart. I could put thoughts on paper and I could articulate if I wanted to, but I chose not to because I wasn't well-received. One day, she made me talk and say a word. I mispronounced a word. To me, it sounded fine. She told me how to pronounce it in front of the whole class. I said it and she said, "That's still wrong." She said it again. And I said it again. It went on for, to me, it seemed like twenty times. And finally, she said, "Get out." You know, just go outside the door.

By then, I was almost in tears because I was embarrassed. So I went and stood outside the door and she came out. To me, she seemed like this huge, huge lady. She seemed like she was seven feet tall and weighed 500 pounds. She just kept screaming at me, "This is how you pronounce it! You've got to say it like this." I remember just standing out there crying. It seemed like hours and hours and hours. That is the worst experience that I can remember in my school career, all over some little word. I can't even recall what the word is now.

The worst part was that I couldn't go home and tell anybody because I felt like it was my fault. I couldn't say the word right and the teacher punished me. I didn't want to embarrass my grandmother. I didn't live with my mom and my dad. I lived with my grandmother. I had uncles that would probably go to the teacher and say, "What you did to our niece was not right," but they wouldn't be able to articulate and then that would embarrass them. So, I just kind of kept it inside. Then I became even quieter in school. I never talked much—ever. I had a few friends, a couple of Black friends, but not many. Most of them didn't like me because they felt that I thought I was smart, because I was in the advanced classes. I vividly remember not talking unless I had to.

I feel like I didn't have role models speaking standard English in my house when I was growing up. The way they spoke in my house was the way that I

spoke. I became intimidated—almost invisible and quiet. Even with my family I was almost invisible. Usually I would just sit and read a book. I was a quiet child who everybody thought was smart. But, my family had so many other things going on. I grew up with nine adults in the house, sleeping in a bed with three or four people.

I did have family, my Aunt and a couple cousins, that used standard English, but they lived in another state. They would send me things. They were role models that made sure I got to college, but they weren't there to work with me when I was small. They worked with me as I got older to make sure I pronounced words right, but by then I was so set in my ways and I was so fearful that I couldn't even hear or even think when some people tried to help. I still think I'm at that point.

I remember I had to do this speech on something I wrote in college. What I wrote was great. I practiced presenting this speech for weeks. I got up in front of class and I thought I was doing a great job articulating what I had to say. After I finished the professor talked to me and said, "Well, you did a wonderful job. I really like what you put on your paper, but your speech needs some work. You still use a lot of Black English and that's going to keep you from going where you need to go in education. The only thing you need to change about your personality is the way you speak." I was simply devastated, embarrassed, and lacked even more confidence in the future.

I couldn't just change the way I spoke. Some people can make the transition to standard English. They can hear it. But, I've always had trouble with that. I even went to a speech therapist to make sure that I could pronounce the *th* sounds, the endings, and things like that. By then, I was so old that I had this great fear and I just couldn't even hear the sounds that the speech therapist was trying to get me to make.

My husband is the only one that can sit down with me in private and try to help me. In school I say to my students, "Okay guys, how do you pronounce this?" At least 20 students will say, "This is how you say it." I can establish this environment of trust with my students and a few really good friends. I can say, "I'm teaching ancient civilization. What is this word? Please help me." But, it has to be people that I truly trust.

In my classroom or anytime I give a workshop I say, "If you don't understand what I said, please feel free to raise your hand and I'll be happy to slow down, because I talk really, really fast anyway and I'm from North Carolina. I have a southern accent and I still use Black English. Please feel free to have me repeat it and I'd be happy to do that." I have to establish these ground rules before I am comfortable enough to speak in front of some groups of people.

As far as leadership, I'm still intimidated when I have to stand up and speak. In EMELI¹ I'm surprised I speak as much as I do. That's probably because equity is so important and it's coming from the heart. I feel like I've got to speak for all students of color. In the workshops you guys say, "Ebony, can you repeat that again." You can hear me hesitate. I don't just (snaps fingers). I have to really think about how I'm going to say it. When I say something at a workshop, I thought about it in my head unless it's spontaneous, which it usually isn't. I think, How am I going to make you guys understand? I feel other people could just say it like (snap) that. I've never been able to do that. I don't make it clear unless I think about it. Then emotion gets into it and you can hear my voice waver. And I don't want emotion to get in my voice. I just feel so strongly about equity. But, it's usually just the equity issues. I don't feel that strongly about most things that I talk about.

When I was working on my masters, after I had been teaching for three years, I made a comment in class and the White, young woman instructor stopped the whole class and everybody stared at me. I don't remember what it was about. I just felt like I was compelled to say it. The instructor said, "You have such great comments and meaningful thoughts when you decide to share with us and you decide to speak." There I was. This professor and everybody just stared at me as if they were staring into my soul like, "Why don't you speak? Why are you so quiet?"

I totally agree with the fact that you have to be able to speak standard English in order to succeed in "White" America. If you don't, you're judged by that, no matter what kind of credentials you have or anything else. I'm very sensitive to kids. Whether it be Spanish or Vietnamese or any kind of language, I take my time. Rule number one is get the kid to smile. Don't force the student to speak as soon as they come in the classroom. By the fifth and sixth grade level you're already self-conscious about the way you look or who's going to be your friends. So the first thing I do is make sure they smile. I can speak Spanish and it's worse than my English. But I can always make students and parents smile when I try to talk to them in Spanish or in any other language I have. I'm one of the many teachers who promote and encourage students to work on oratorical contests, assemblies, speeches, drama, presentations, etc., because it's important to me to get kids comfortable speaking into a microphone and before a large audience. I don't want them growing up with this fear that I did that everybody's watching and if I make one mistake . . . I'm really, really good at that because I'm so sensitive to the issue of language.

As a teacher, I still don't like to speak in front of a group of people, but I'll do it. If I make mistakes, I have this relationship with most students, parents,

¹ Ebony was a participant in the Equity in Mathematics Education Leadership Institute (EMELI) for two years.

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and other people where they don't mind and I just keep smiling. I use poetry and music a lot. I can integrate that with all my kids no matter what race. We get invited to perform at the colleges, because these kids are so alive when they're on stage. They love to present and they're not self-conscious about anything. I do work on making sure they use standard English. But I won't degrade them if they make a mistake. We work together in order to make corrections and gain confidence around the issue of language.

Finally, I would like to leave you with this thought. Teachers must respect and validate whatever language and culture students bring to class. To ensure that students' confidence level around language reaches its maximum potential, teachers of African American students should learn about Black English and its history. There are strategies for helping African American children who use Black English to make the transition to standard English. It is essential that students learn standard English, but this transition must come in a supportive environment.