

Teachers' Corner

A Brief Guide for Understanding Dialectal Differences



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Special education teachers need to be prepared to support all learners. Regional dialectal and linguistic differences are common and sometimes mistaken for a disability or a deficit within the child (Hendricks et al., 2021; Griffen et al., in press). The following provides a brief overview of dialectal differences reflected in special education classrooms (Hendricks et al., 2021; Griffen et al., in press) along with strategies to support diverse learners.

Dialectal differences and disorders are different, and practitioners should understand the differences. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, a dialect that is influenced by someone's cultural background is not a disorder. However, it is challenging for practitioners to discriminate between dialectal differences and disorders, and the differences may often get identified on language evaluations as a disorder (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important that practitioners know the cultural background of their students to determine where their linguistic foundation started (Hamilton et al., 2018).

What are Dialectal Differences?

Some varieties of dialects are regional, ethnic, sociolect, or accent. There are also a variety of dialect sub-groups. Regional dialect is when a dialect is influenced by the area a person lives. Ethnic dialect is when a person's ethnicity group influences a dialect. Sociolect group is when a person's social group influences their dialect. Accents are influenced by phonetic and the pronunciation of

those phonemes which causes accents or dialectal differences (Crowley & Houts-Smith's, 2010).

Understanding the difference between a dialect difference and a disability is significant because many times, students from minority populations are labeled as having a speech-language disorder, a learning disability, or an intellectual disability at a higher rate than their nonminority peers (Kreskow, 2013). There is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education in the United States (Kreskow, 2013). Educators need to be aware of the differences so that they do not make inappropriate referrals to special education or view the difference as a deficit and thus lower expectations for their students.

The following provides a brief overview of common differences seen in classrooms. Table 1 provides a quick reference chart.

Strategies

Fortunately, there are strategies teachers can employ to help them understand their own biases, support multilingual and culturally diverse learners, and teach diverse learners that the ability to code switch is a skill!

1. Understand the differences and identify these differences in the classroom

One must first understand the dialect and linguistic differences are just that: Differences. Teachers should not tell students whether dialect or grammar differences are right or wrong. We must teach students the differences and help them understand when and how to code switch (Hamilton et al., 2018). For example, African languages English (AAE) have some patterns such as deleting consonants in clusters (e.g., "hep" for help) due to African American tribal languages having limited consonant clusters. Another AAE language pattern is voiced and voiceless "th" being replaced by /f/ for /d/, such as "dis for this" (Velleman & Pearson, 2010).

2. Understand that Students are learning to code switch or are using code-switching in the classroom.

Teachers need to understand and note correct linguistic differences in oral communication. Some differences can pose difficulties in learning writing or reading. Teachers can help students understand the difference and give these students more time to process (Hamilton et al., 2018). For example even across regions of the United

Table 1: Common Dialectal Differences in the Classroom

Region or Language	Sample Differences	Examples
African American English Vernacular	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deleting consonants in clusters · Voiced and voiceless phonemes · Double negatives · Substitution of blends · Plurality · Possessive · Past tense 	Practitioners have noted that children that speak African American English (AAE) have some patterns such as deleting consonants in clusters (e.g., “hep” for help) due to African American tribal languages having limited consonant clusters. Another AAE language pattern is voiced and voiceless “th” being replaced by /f/ for /d/, such as “dis for this.” Also, use double negatives, such as “I don’t have no pencil” instead of “I don’t have a pencil.” They may articulate with the substitution of /ks/ for /sk/ for example, “ask” is articulated “aks.” Plurality can be different, for example, “two cats” the AAE pattern would “two cat”.
Arabic Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Absence of phonemes 	P sounds are absent.
Brazilian Portugese Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Absence of phonemes 	H and R sounds are absent.
Native American Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Native American languages represent over 20 language families · Sound contrasts based on ancestral language 	Up to 200 Native American languages represent over 20 language families. This provides a rich ancestral language tradition with its pronunciation and grammar rules. These rules are produced by sound contrasts based on ancestral language, a pronunciation that parallels sound inventories found in the local or regional dialects or combines principles from both sources to resemble standard English.
Regions of the United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Differences in short /i/ and short /e/ 	The south is referred to as having a southern drawl. A study furthered the “understanding of acoustic and perceptual differences between two of the most marked dialects (Mid-Atlantic and Southern) and one of the least marked dialects (Midland) of American English. The listeners showed the greatest vowel identification accuracy for the Mid-Atlantic talker (95.2%), followed by the Midland talker (92.5%), and finally the Southern talker (79.7%).” In areas like Wisconsin, students may make the sound short /i/ and short /e/ sound differently. However, in areas such as Arkansas, the short /i/ and short /e/ may sound the same. For example, this can cause the name “Ben” to sound very similar to “bin.”
Vietnamese Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Higher nasalance · Absence of phonemes 	In addition to articulation and speech patterns, nasalance scores can vary across cultures. For example, southern Vietnamese speakers produce the higher nasalance scores on the vowel /a/, followed by /i/ and /u/. Nasalance scores also varied across stimuli, with the falling and restricted tone producing significantly lower scores than those produced by other tones. Asian languages do not have R or L sounds.

Note: Please note that the common dialectal differences noted here are only a tiny sample of the diversity reflected across our expanding world (Cristia et al., 2012; Griffen et al., 2023; Hamilton et al., 2018; Hendricks et al., 2021; Leap, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2021; Rickford & King, 2016; Robinson-Zafartu, 1996; Shi & Canizales, 2013; Stockman et al., 2016; Velleman & Pearson, 2010; Wallace, 2015)

States, there are differences in short /i/ and short /e/. In areas like Wisconsin, students may make the sound short /i/ and short /e/ sound differently. However, in areas such as Arkansas, the short /i/ and short /e/ may sound the same. For example, this can cause the name “Ben” to sound very similar to “bin” (Cristia et al., 2012; Griffen et al., 2023).

3. Celebrate code-switching in the classroom as an advanced skill versus a deficit.

The ability to switch codes is an advanced cognitive process. It takes time to learn and generalize across situations. Once a child can do this, their ability to communicate and be successful across cultures is enhanced. This should be seen as a skill and praised as such (Hamilton et al., 2018).

4. Collaborate with others.

Teachers do not always know how to address dialect or linguistic differences. In these situations, remember that you are not alone. Ask others. Speech-language pathologists are trained in disorders versus dialect and may be able to assist by observing and giving recommendations. You can ask a parent or guardian about the dialect as a means to respect the difference. Find a trusted colleague who is more knowledgeable than you and, if possible, comes from the culture you are trying to learn about. Remember, though; it is not the job of minoritized populations to teach us. It is our responsibility to keep learning and doing better. Keep reading the literature on addressing dialect and linguistic differences in the classroom (McSorley et al., 2016).

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