The study of the English language has undergone some remarkable changes in the decades between the 1960s and the present. Transformational grammar signaled a new theoretical understanding of the nature of language and provided new tools for analyzing the grammatical structure of English. At the same time, sociolinguistic research focused closely on the contexts of language use and forced us to consider anew the nature of linguistic variation and change. In addition, we broadly expanded our definitions of literacy and how it works, and complicated the notions of how to measure reading and writing competence.

During this same period, legal reforms reopened American borders, which had been effectively closed to immigration since the 1920s, and for the first time since World War I the United States found itself assimilating large numbers of nonanglophones into schools and the workplace, as well as into the social and political fabric of the nation. Government policy makers struggled with the issues sparked by the new American demographic, while linguistic researchers studied the impact of changing immigration patterns on language loyalty, bilingualism and language loss.

Each of these developments in language use and language scholarship had one or more components that played itself out in the classroom. Teacher training programs have responded to the promises and challenges of these new developments in their efforts to prepare new instructors for what they will encounter on the job. Prospective teachers take courses in the newest ways of looking at language both theoretically and in practice. They study ways of dealing with students speaking stigmatized varieties of English or other languages entirely.

In more practical terms, teachers are encouraged to reframe traditional subjects like vocabulary and grammar through the literature that their students will read, and they chart students’ writing progress by means of portfolios rather than fill-in-the-bubble tests. In grammar lessons, traditional Reed-Kellogg sentence diagrams have given way to the tree diagrams made popular by the newest syntactic theories. Teachers applied their new awareness of the language that their students brought with them to the classroom to help their students come to terms with
the academic English necessary for school success. And a whole-language methodology has encouraged the teaching of reading and writing as complex, contextualized activities rather than testable individual skills.

But on closer inspection, while there’s certainly a lot going on in the schools that’s new, the impact of recent linguistic research on the schools has actually been minimal. One of the first things that veteran colleagues and supervisors do with new teachers is to tell them to forget what they learned about language in college. In many cases, this reprogramming isn’t even necessary, as new teachers seem to form their attitudes toward language and their ideas about the appropriate ways to teach the language arts not from what they learned in college, but from models that they absorbed during their own school days. Far too many of these new teachers seem to have gone from one side of the high school desk to the other. Whatever happened in college doesn’t seem to have changed their minds about what school’s supposed to be, at least so far as language and literacy are concerned.

Of course while school is an important site of language use and of linguistic development, formal instruction is not the only vehicle for language learning, nor is it necessarily the most effective one. We typically acquire our first language as infants and young children from the family and friends who surround us, in day care or preschool, and in other informal social settings, learning more about linguistic structure and the functions of communication by age six than we will subsequently learn in any other setting, formal or informal. Later in life, as adults, we deploy language at home, in the workplace, and in other settings, developing and refining our ways of communication; responding to the words of others; adapting to new communication technologies; and shaping those technologies to fit our needs as readers and writers.

We’re immersed in language from cradle to grave, but because the language arts are a major focus of the American classroom, we look to school, not to the home, the neighborhood or the workplace, as the primary site where literacy is taught and refined, where literacy is measured, where foreign languages are introduced. And we think of school as the site where students speaking languages other than English make their transition to English.

It’s commonly accepted that school is where “standard” English is inculcated and “good” reading and writing behaviors are introduced, reinforced, or supplemented. It is in the schools, both through periodic testing and through day-to-day interaction, where we as students may first discover that some people’s language use is different from ours, and perhaps more significantly, that some people’s language – maybe even our own language – just isn’t up to snuff.

We’ve come to recognize over the past half century that the classroom is one place where children’s language attitudes are challenged, altered or reinforced, where linguistic confidence is built, eroded, or even shattered. School also serves the broader community as an arena where public language policy issues are foregrounded, or even battled over. And it’s the place that often seems to be playing catch-up when it comes to technological advances, as educators struggle to figure out how to work the newest communication technologies – often ones al-
ready mastered by the students outside the classroom — and integrate them into the learning process.

But as the epigraph to this essay suggests, despite the best efforts of linguists and teacher-educators, many teachers, once they have students of their own, address issues of language in the classroom much as teachers always have. Teachers today, like teachers in the past, still tend to think of language as a discrete set of skills which can be taught incrementally, then carefully measured and rigorously corrected. When it comes to grammar, usage, spelling, and pronunciation, many teachers still see themselves as language gatekeepers and arbitrators who must correct every bit of written prose they encounter and shape every bit of speech so that it comes out better.

Teachers are pressured to do this by older colleagues, and by school authorities who see new teachers not as professionals actively creating and transmitting knowledge, but as employees obliged to follow a pre-set, teacher-proof curriculum, and by a widespread attitude toward language that privileges an ideal of standard speech and writing without looking very closely at how speakers and writers actually deploy their words. Whether their aims are idealistic or practical, whether they want to prepare students to think critically, to take their place as well-informed citizens of a strong democracy, to embrace liberal education and pursue life-long active learning, or to simply be employable, many teachers feel their mission is also to teach students not that our language choices are always contextually nuanced, but that there’s one and only one appropriate way to speak and write. Despite all our advances in knowledge about language history and change, about language structure and variation, about the complex social functions of language, and about the technologies of communication, the controlling moral notion that language must be viewed as either right or wrong, white or black, hasn’t changed significantly since the eighteenth century.

From Black English to Ebonics: The schools and language variety

Two events that call up issues of how the schools respond to language variety frame the period covered by this survey of language and education: the Ann Arbor Black English case in 1979, which underscored the need for educators to understand the language that their students bring to the classroom; and the Ebonics resolution in 1997 that put the Oakland, California, School Board on the nation’s front pages. While the Ann Arbor decision promised a progressive approach to educating speakers of nonstandard varieties of English, the controversy over Ebonics showed that thinking about language variety both in the schools and in American society more generally had not progressed at all.

In 1978, a group of parents sued the Ann Arbor, Michigan, School Board in federal court for failing to overcome significant linguistic barriers that prevented their children from becoming academically successful. Supported by expert testimony from linguists and educators, attorneys for the plaintiffs argued that, “as a class of black economically disadvantaged children living in the social isolation of a housing project [their children] speak a vernacular of English, referred to as ‘Black English,’ which is so different from the English commonly spoken in the public schools as to constitute a language barrier which impedes their equal partici-
pation in King School’s instructional programs” (King 1978).

In deciding the case, Judge Charles Joiner acknowledged that “a major goal of a school system is to teach reading, writing, speaking and understanding standard English.” Joiner noted that African American parents did not want their students to be taught Black English, a language variety that they already used extensively in their informal communication. He acknowledged that the teachers at King School had no trouble understanding their students’ variety of English, and the students had no trouble understanding their teachers. Even so, Joiner found that although it is not used by all African Americans, and that many people who are not black also use it, Black English is a dialect that is related to race. More to the point, he agreed with the plaintiffs’ claim that a language barrier prevented the children at the school who used Black English in their informal communication from learning to read standard English texts.

Because that language barrier “was one of the causes of the children’s reading problems . . . which impeded the children’s equal participation in the school’s educational program,” and because federal law required the school system to overcome that language barrier, in finding for the plaintiffs the court directed the school district to remedy the situation. In response, the Ann Arbor School Board offered a two-part plan. It would create a program to teach the district’s teachers about “the contrasting features of black English and standard English, the identification of black English speakers, [and] the accommodation of code-switching needs in black English speakers.” And teachers would learn as well to apply their new linguistic knowledge “to help individual students read standard English.”

Unfortunately, court-ordered linguistics in Ann Arbor, while it awakened the educational establishment to the need to study the language that students bring with them to school, didn’t have an impact either on the language arts curriculum in most schools or on national reading scores. Almost twenty years after the King decision, and 2,000 miles away, the School Board of the California’s Oakland Unified School District, desperate to improve the test scores of its own African American students, passed a resolution declaring that Ebonics, the speech of the majority of students in the Oakland schools, was not a dialect of English but a separate language derived from West African roots (Oakland 1996). The Board ordered teachers to “devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language . . . and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English-language skills” (emphasis added). Oakland was driven to this position because African Americans, who constituted the majority group among the district’s students, consistently underperformed on achievement tests and were disproportionately represented in remedial programs in the schools. But by recognizing the speech of these students as so different from English as to constitute a separate language, Oakland went well beyond the claims of a language barrier made by the plaintiffs in the Ann Arbor case. And by explicitly requiring schools to use and maintain Ebonics, while also helping stu-
dents acquire English, the Board provoked a national controversy.

Oakland’s use of the term Ebonics rather than the more common Black English, or the term most linguists use, African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, reinforces the claim that Ebonics isn’t English. That assertion of separate-ness in turn allowed Oakland to target federal bilingual education funds for its African American students. But by declaring linguistic independence, the School Board was also expressing the community’s frustration and anger that plans like the one mandated by the federal courts in the King decision had changed nothing. The district’s African American students, who constituted the majority of students in Oakland’s schools, did worse than any other racial or ethnic group on several standard measures: they weren’t reading at grade level; they performed poorly on achievement tests; and their drop-out rate was unacceptably high.

The Ann Arbor decision succeeded in the courts but not in the classroom, where black students continued to fail or perform below expectations at school. Many also failed to transition to standard English. The Oakland Resolution initially failed in the arena of public opinion, generating so much opposition on the national scene – and particularly from African American leaders like Jesse Jackson and Kweisi Mfume – that within days the district hired a public relations firm to try to repair the damage and within a couple of weeks it issued a clarification backing away from its insistence on separating Ebonics from English. In an amended resolution passed on Jan. 15, 1997, the Board retracted its initial claim that Ebonics was an independent language genetically encoded in the DNA of African Americans. Instead, the new resolution represented Ebonics as genetically descended from – that is, based on or related to – African languages and not merely a dialect of English. The Oakland Board repeated the parallel it saw between African-American students and other students classified as having limited proficiency in English, though it played down its request for bilingual education dollars. And the Board insisted that it never intended for Ebonics to be taught in the classroom, nor did it envision a program of language maintenance (federally-funded bilingual education programs must, by definition, be transitional). Instead, without referring to the King decision, Oakland indicated that it wished to proceed very much the same way that Ann Arbor had done, educating teachers in the language their students brought with them to the classroom, so that these teachers would be better able to lead their students from Ebonics toward standard English (Oakland 1997).

Responding to Oakland’s initial resolution, the U.S. Department of Education quickly ruled that Ebonics was not a foreign language and Oakland was not eligible for federal bilingual education funds for its African American students (Bennett 1996). But after Oakland softened its stand on Ebonics, Jesse Jackson, on a fact-finding trip to the city, revised his own opinion of the School Board’s efforts. They were just trying to teach their students good English, he concluded, and that was fine with him. But the School Board’s revision came too late – the political damage was already done, and just as the fallout from the Ann Arbor decision quickly subsided, Oakland eventually abandoned its efforts to put Ebonics on the national agenda.
As it turned out, the program that Oakland sought to implement, called Standard English Proficiency, or SEP, was one that was already in place (and federally-funded) in a number of California schools. SEP uses foreign language methodologies to teach standard English to children who speak a nonstandard dialect, or whose proficiency in English is otherwise suspect. SEP avoids the term dialect altogether – because it has negative connotations – substituting the label “home language” instead. Students coming from backgrounds where AAVE is spoken are regularly asked to translate from their home language into standard English, much as Spanish speakers are asked to translate from Spanish to English, or English speakers learning a foreign language are asked to translate from English into the target language. The assumption of SEP is that a student’s home language is not an incorrect or stigmatized variety of English, but a different language altogether, and so learning standard English should not cause students to feel that their own variety of English is being devalued or criticized.

In practice, however, SEP is no different from traditional methods assuming a good English/bad English model, methods whose goal is to correct student’s language and get them to use a prescribed norm. In accomplishing this, students’ “home language,” whether or not it is English, is routinely devalued or criticized both implicitly and, sometimes, quite directly. Fifth-grade teacher Carrie Secret, a member of the Oakland School Board Task Force that came up with the original Ebonics resolution, used SEP in her classes, teaching her students that their home language is their L1, the conventional linguistic term for ‘first language.’ According to Secret, “Telling [students] that black English is different, not wrong, makes them feel better about themselves” (Walker 1996). Secret adds, “If a child says, ‘You was sitting in my chair,’ I say to them, ’L2 please – you were sitting in my chair.’”

Telling English-speaking students that they are really speaking a foreign language, an idea that is patently a fiction to students and teachers alike, does not disguise the fact that the students’ English is being corrected. Moreover, the pretense that SEP methodology deals with bilingualism rather than a conventional notion of right and wrong quickly falls away in actual practice. Secret’s teaching clearly emphasizes ‘correctness’ rather than ‘translation’ from L1 to L2:

Yesterday, Secret had her students read essays aloud and told them to enunciate.

“Jist for seven days …” one boy began.

Secret interrupted him. “You said, ‘jist.’ Use it right.”

The boy corrected himself using ‘just,’ the standard English translation.

[Walker 1996; emphasis added]

As this vignette shows, teachers often take correction too far. Secret wants her students to say “just” because it’s “right.” But she’s actually legislating a standard of correct “enunciation” that is not shared by language experts. None of the major English dictionaries mark the common pronunciation “jist” as deviant, nonstandard, or even dialectal, which means that Secret’s pronunciation standard, in this case and perhaps in others as well, is not shared by most users of English. Students
are well aware that school language often differs from conversational and written norms outside the classroom. That’s a “teaching moment” that the language arts curriculum would do well to explore as a fine example of how prescriptive standards are often at odds with actual usage. But this sort of opportunity to discuss language variation in context is typically rejected in favor of a more rigid, more testable, and more clearly traditional approach to usage.

If what happened in Ann Arbor and in Oakland signals anything at all, it signals the ability of the schools to embrace language theory even as they ignore its implications. In the name of sociolinguistics they reject language diversity. Celebrating Ebonics in one breath, in the next they campaign to stamp out bad English, which their students readily translate as the home language, the Ebonics, that they bring to the classroom.

When Languages Collide: From Lau v. Nichols to Prop. 227

The diversity inherent in English is one aspect of language study that the schools routinely gloss over as if it were an embarrassment. Our educational system seems just as helpless in the face of students who don’t speak English at all, or who have a limited command of the language. Another pair of legal actions delineate how American schools educate – or fail to educate – their non-English-speaking students. The U. S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Lau v. Nichols (1974) ushered in an era of court-mandated bilingual education designed to erase the language barrier which prevented nonanglophones from succeeding in school. And the passage, by 61% of the voters, of California’s Proposition 227 in June, 1998, signaled a backlash against attempts by the schools to accommodate the educational needs of students whose English was limited.

American schools, uncomfortable with dialect diversity in the classroom, were quick to transmute sociolinguistic insights concerning student language use into a simplistic and ineffective method for correcting what teachers perceived to be not normal language variation but unacceptable student error. They didn’t handle the issue of non-English-speaking children much better.

Historically, before 1974 schools dealt with non-English speakers in two ways: most commonly, they ignored these children – a method called by its proponents “immersion,” but often referred to by critics as “sink or swim,” since most students immersed in English-only classes effectively sank. The few attempts to meet the problem head-on had little impact. In the early twentieth century, at the height of the pre-World War I immigration boom, New York City offered special “steamer” classes for immigrant children, to ease their transition to English, but there were never enough seats to meet student demand. Instead, formally teaching English as a second language was generally reserved for foreign-born adults attending night school, while mainstream classrooms, full of nonanglophone children, dealt with the problem randomly and sporadically, focusing for example on eradicating foreign accent through repetitive phonics exercises and speech therapy rather than systematic language instruction.

In addition to the steamer classes, there were some bilingual programs that did exist before the 1974 Lau decision. In the late nineteenth century, a few Mid-
western school systems – among them Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, offered bilingual English-German schools in order to woo students from the German-language parochial schools into public classrooms. These programs promised both English and L1 language maintenance – preserving the students’ German, not replacing it. But World War I put an end to public support for German-language instruction in the United States – for a time several states made the teaching of all foreign languages, not just German, illegal. That ban was overturned by the U. S. Supreme Court in the case of Meyer v. Nebraska in 1923, but the damage had already been done, and in the isolationist period that followed World War I the United States shut down immigration and turned inward both politically and linguistically. Before the war, 25% of American high school students studied German, but after 1917 few Americans studied any foreign language in school at all.

With immigration pretty much at a standstill after the war, American schools no longer had to worry about integrating immigrant children into the classroom or teaching them English, and the bilingual problem of the early 20th century managed to resolve itself largely without the schools’ intervention. Even before that, though, immigrant children quickly took to English, becoming fluent enough, for example, to translate for their limited-English-speaking parents. Unfortunately, the English that they mastered wasn’t always the academic register of English necessary for school success. Following this largely bilingual second generation was a third generation who were mostly monolingual English speakers. But with the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, the schools once again saw an influx of children whose English was tentative or nonexistent.

Responding to the new wave of immigration in the last third of the 20th century, some schools did develop both English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education programs to deal with the new nonanglophones. But once again they failed to meet demand, and once again many children were left behind. The plaintiffs in Lau v. Nichols claimed that the San Francisco schools were ignoring the majority of their nonanglophone Chinese children, and that the inability of these children to speak English presented an insurmountable language barrier in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. San Francisco did provide English learning programs for about 1,000 Chinese students, but another 2,800 had no language services and were effectively excluded from any opportunities to learn.

The U. S. Supreme Court agreed unanimously with the Lau plaintiffs. As the lower court had done in the Ann Arbor decision, the high court now ordered the schools to remedy the situation without specifying how they were to do so. And because the decision came from the Supreme Court, unlike the Ann Arbor case the ruling had national implications. Following Lau v. Nichols, schools in San Francisco and across the nation began implementing programs of transitional bilingual education calculated to move non-English speakers to English while keeping them up to speed in terms of their academic work.

The theory behind bilingual education was both elegant and appealing. Not only did it address the court’s concerns, it also seemed to offer a way around the lan-
language barrier that would ensure that English learners could keep up with their anglophone peers in their academic subjects. It was clear that during the time it takes for nonanglophones to learn English – usually several years – children often make little or no progress in basic school subjects such as reading, history, math, and science. This problem was severe in the early twentieth century, the last time there was a significant number of nonanglophones attending school. While many of them clearly succeeded academically, drop out rates for immigrant children in urban areas often exceeded fifty percent.

To address the renewed presence of nonanglophones in the schoolroom, the bilingual methodology provides students with an opportunity to learn English, while at the same time receiving instruction in basic subjects in their first language. That way they don’t fall behind their English-speaking peers in content mastery while they are learning English.

Unfortunately, as with other theories of the language arts, the ideal didn’t always play out in practice. In many cases the schools did not implement bilingual education programs that were either adequate or effective. It was hard for the schools to find staff trained to deliver instruction in the many languages that immigrant children bring to school, and also trained to teach English as a second language. Observers complained that children were not being taught English; that their academics were being ignored; that students speaking a variety of languages were lumped together in a single bilingual ed class that was taught, for example, only in Spanish; and that anglophone children still benefited from the best teachers and the strongest curricula, while students in the bilingual classes had untrained teachers and were not challenged academically.

Of course there were exceptions, programs with effective academic components, as well as a few programs that emphasized the need for all students to learn an additional language, not just the nonanglophones. However, the success stories didn’t allay fears that schools were failing to teach English to immigrant children. This, together with a growing resentment of immigration itself, both illegal and legal, led to the kind of backlash represented by Proposition 227, which moved California’s schools from bilingual education to structured immersion – a year of “sheltered” intensive English instruction for students whose knowledge of the language is weak or nonexistent, followed by a return to the mainstream classroom where only English is spoken. Proposition 227 also permitted parents to sue schools that violated the law’s provisions.

Proponents of Prop. 227 argued that bilingual education in the state had come to mean monolingual education in one language, Spanish, for much of a child’s school career. This in turn had led to low scores on standardized tests that required English fluency, and generally poor educational outcomes for Spanish-speaking children. They also argued that, since there were some 140 different foreign languages spoken by children in the schools, it would never be possible to offer effective bilingual programs in every language.

Opponents of the proposal countered that successful bilingual programs were being penalized because the weak ones had failed, and that the state should not impose a single method, a year of “sheltered immersion” with no guaranteed
outcome, on schools that were already exploring other methods of transitioning nonanglophones to English.

But it was politics, not linguistics or educational theory, that decided the matter for Californians. For one thing, the public rejected bilingual education because it took too long. Language learners need several years to gain fluency in a new tongue. Non-anglophones may pick up conversational English from their peers fairly quickly, but mastering the technical vocabulary and the reading and writing skills necessary for school success takes much longer.

A key aim of bilingual education is to keep students from falling behind in essential subjects as they learn English. Ideally, once their new language is up to speed, such students can move to English instruction in these subjects and still be at grade level. In many cases these students will switch to English as their dominant language, but some remain fluent in their first language. That outcome, when it occurs, isn’t a crowd-pleaser. Bilingual education was only tolerated so long as it seemed a way to replace students’ first language with English. But the same voters and politicians who complain that America can’t compete in the global market or assure its defenses unless more Americans master foreign languages argue that maintaining a first language alongside English is both illegal and unpatriotic. And so they either treat their bilingual programs as a place to warehouse students with unpromising futures, or they cut them altogether. Unfortunately, as it was in the early twentieth century, the result for many nonanglophone children in either case is that, while English comes easily enough to them, school English remains for many a closed book.

**Grammar in the classroom**

As my returning student so bluntly put it, summarizing my own futile attempt to get him to think of his students’ language not as a feeble and often wrong-headed approximation of an idealized standard model of discourse, but as an exciting, developing, energetic, highly-competent variety of language in its own right, I was wrong.

The schools are just not buying any linguistic approach that isn’t going to focus on correctness. They are committed to teaching a model of standard English, which makes sense since standard English is prized for academic discourse and it’s considered the key to a good job. The connection between mastering a particular dialect and getting hired is actually tenuous, and many who have adopted a model of precise, standardized speech and writing to escape discrimination find that employers determined not to hire them will find another reason not to do so.

But the main problem isn’t that standard English may not pay off the way it’s supposed to. The difficulty with the school model of standard English is that it is a rigid one, focusing narrowly on uniform spelling, punctuation, and a handful of grammatical features like subject-verb agreement. Such a view allows for little in the way of flexibility or variation. But in actual use, standard English is hardly univocal or monolithic. Instead, it permits its users a great deal of latitude as they communicate, even regularly allowing forms that would be marked wrong on a standardized test of standard English.
Confronted with a model of standard discourse that does not offer a neat package with easy-to-follow instructions, schools either reject it as inaccurate or argue that students have to learn the rules before they can deal with the exceptions (hopefully they won’t get to those exceptions until long after they graduate). The problem is that this common walk-before-you-run methodology doesn’t fit well with language learning.

In foreign language classes, students who master the textbook rules invariably encounter difficulties when they begin negotiating the rough and tumble of language use on the outside. And when we teach English in schools to speakers of English, we are dealing with students who have already mastered the language at a very young age. Telling such students they have to abide by rules and structures that their own linguistic experience already shows are unrealistic, we’re not actually giving them the structure that teachers think they need, but adding instead to their sense that all the rules they learn in school bear little resemblance to what goes on beyond the schoolhouse door.

And so the schools reject the descriptive model of standard English or any other language variety. After fifty years of folding linguistic theory into the training of classroom teachers, students still leave high school thinking that a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. They also still think it best not to end a sentence with a preposition, although they have no idea why. Many aren’t even sure what a preposition is, though some of them will hazard that it’s probably not the name of a person, place or thing. They know the passive voice is something to avoid, but they’re also not quite sure of the difference between the passive and the past tense. And they learn, in school, that no matter how high their grades, their language is still prone to error.

But most of all they learn that, while grammar may be a game they’re either good at or clueless about, grammar lessons are designed to make their eyes glaze over. There are multiple reasons why this remains the case, and multiple choice tests to demonstrate the failure of grammar lessons to make a dent in their consciousness.

For one thing, English teachers aren’t well-equipped to teach the traditional, prescriptive school grammar that has ceased to be a useful tool for language analysis, and they’re equally unprepared to teach a linguistically-informed language curriculum, either. These teachers typically choose the profession because they love literature and want to initiate their students into its great mysteries, and when they think of the beauty inherent in language they are almost always thinking of elevated poetic diction and limpid prose, not the witty, resourceful, and thoroughly creative language that their own students bring to class, and certainly not the syntactic analysis of such everyday speech acts as conversation, which tends to be full of slang, and worse still, swearing. Few of these teachers take more than one or two language courses, not much compared to the eight to ten literature classes and the huge number of units in curriculum, child development, and testing that are necessary for licensing. And while these courses introduce teachers to new ways of looking at language and language pedagogy, they are typically pressured to forget what they learned about language in college once they have their own classrooms, because
only a rigid, teach-to-the-test approach to grammar can get students past the standardized tests they all must take.

Certainly one or two language classes can change a prospective teacher’s focus on matters linguistic, but what works against that is a school culture bent on nonstop inculcation, correction and assessment. Teaching to the test was driving the curriculum long before the federal No Child Left Behind law forced schools to fit a one-size-fits-nobody pattern, but we are now faced with the possibility that standardized testing will move up from K-12 and permeate the college environment as well. Such in any case is one of the proposals to come out of the Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’s report on the state of higher education in America, and as I write this the governor of Texas, the state that Secretary Spellings calls home and the one where No Child Left Behind began, has proposed that all college seniors take a standardized test in their major before graduating. Inevitably, such large-scale testing will be multiple-choice rather than a more direct measure of language production and analysis. And inevitably it will reinforce the kind of grammatical instruction that has already failed to give either teachers or their students any insight into how language actually works.

Since a major concern of the schools has been the teaching of standard English – a concern reinforced by court decisions like King and Lau – the focus of grammatical instruction and testing is on the structure of that code. This is supposed to help students who are still learning the school’s language, and it’s supposed to deepen the linguistic understanding of the students who come to school already using the linguistic code that matches the one being taught. Some curricula fold grammar instruction into the larger study of literature, but whether sample sentences are drawn from a worksheet or a novel doesn’t really change the school’s focus on linguistic correctness, and it doesn’t help students to understand why some forms are considered correct while others aren’t.

Linking writing instruction to linguistic correctness further reinforces the school’s prescriptive grammar curriculum. Despite several decades of research into how writers create texts and how readers evaluate them, and a curriculum in many schools that claims to focus on the “writing process” model which some of that research produced, school writing instruction still ultimately focuses not on rhetorical sophistication or the ways in which different writers work through a writing test, but on the creation of a final product containing well-formed sentences and fancy vocabulary that is spelled and punctuated correctly.

Schools may defend their focus on correctness as test-driven, and it’s true that standardized tests of writing competence either look for error-free paragraphs or test students’ knowledge of writing conventions using multiple choice questions. But testing alone doesn’t drive the prescriptive approach to language that remains endemic in our schools. American society simply expects its English teachers to be language experts, even if their interests are not in language but in literature. College English majors are routinely asked by friends in other disciplines to correct their papers or settle disputes a proper form or the meaning of a word. Some of them take to the role readily, earning reputations as correctness freaks who take pleasure in lopping prepositions
off the ends of sentences. Others confess to having no real basis for an opinion, only to be treated skeptically or with distrust. And those who go on to become English teachers find that whether they accept the role of language guardian willingly or with reluctance, they must do so for reasons of job security.

In the end, the schools’ focus on standard English and prescriptive grammar does not seem to get students to master correct forms on standardized tests. Instead of creating graduates who know where to put the commas, schools produce students who are either over-confident or insecure about their linguistic competence, wanting to be correct, to be sure, but grateful that they’re no longer in a position where their language will be graded and assessed by standards that still seem to many of them arbitrary, at best, or at worst, a mystery.

**Making things different**

Faced with a final exam question that called for analyzing the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar and their appropriateness in school curricula, another one of my students, one preparing to be a high school English teacher, deployed a faith-based argument that replaced the linguistics we had been studying, which was after all just a theory, with nothing less than intelligent design:

I think I support prescriptivism. I believe that some words are absolutely unacceptable in any situation. I think there should be an accepted way of speaking and deviation would not be tolerated. I believe in a set of absolute values. I believe there is one right and wrong for everyone. Perhaps what I think is right is not what you think is right but in the final analysis that isn’t going to matter. What God thinks is right is what really matters and He doesn’t have one right for you and one right for me.

Once again, one of my students was telling me that, so far as language is concerned, I was wrong.

What are we to make of the fact that new developments in language and technology have had little or no effect on K-12 education, that with a very few exceptions, they’ve either been ignored altogether or used to disguise the fact that our educators are merely putting old wine in new bottles?

Education changes slowly, to be sure – schools still taught typing on manual typewriters when offices all over the U. S. had switched to electrics – but no physics curriculum takes a flat-earth perspective on the universe. Even when biology instruction is subverted by those intent on arguing that evolution is “just a theory,” high school students learn about microbes and the circulatory system, not the four humors and the influence of the zodiac on personality. And students in chem labs aren’t trying to turn lead into gold with a philosopher’s stone, except perhaps at Hogwarts.

Not so with language lessons. Galileo, sitting in a science class today, would be mystified by a curriculum that has gone way beyond his experiment with an inclined plane, but Apollonius, the 2nd-century Greek grammarian who was one of the first to write about the parts of speech, would be perfectly at home with a modern grammar lesson. Even worse, if he found himself transported from the third century BCE to a classroom in California, Archimedes, the Greek mathematician who first described the principle of buoyancy, might actually find himself
sinking in an English-only immersion class.

For the past half century linguists have been trying, with little success, to change this situation. We’re not proposing to do away with notions of correctness - ideas about appropriate usage form a solid part of the way that English speakers function, and like everyone else, linguists have some definite opinions about good and bad language use. Instead, what we hope to do is to complicate the traditional right-or-wrong approach to language in the schools by demonstrating that in most situations there isn’t a single way to be correct, and by transmuting the correctness dichotomy into a contextually-dependent sliding scale of language that works in particular situations, and language that may not work so well. Plus, that language doesn’t always have to be English.

The title of this essay is pessimistic: in the case of the language arts in the United States, the more things change, the more they seem to stay the same. Still, language researchers don’t give up trying to make them different. However, to succeed at this means reconfiguring some very basic conceptions about language use. That’s something that education is supposed to do, but so far it seems that, despite what theoretically-informed college language classes teach about the workings of language, most schoolteachers don’t apply that knowledge in their own classrooms. As a result, too many students leave school convinced that the linguistic world is flat.

But the situation isn’t really as bleak as that. Outside the classroom things linguistic are not so monochromatic. It’s true that when put on the spot, most people will assert that there’s a right and a wrong way to speak or write, parroting the idea they learned at school and from parents as well. But in actual practice most people take a far more practical and relaxed approach to language. They recognize correct usage as what works in a given context, rather than what’s categorically good or bad. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn, then, is to trust our language instincts, to speak and write language that may not conform to some unattainable ideal which turns out to be not a pole star but a moving target, and to be content with language that – whatever the Educational Testing Service thinks about it – is simply good enough to do the job.

Works Cited