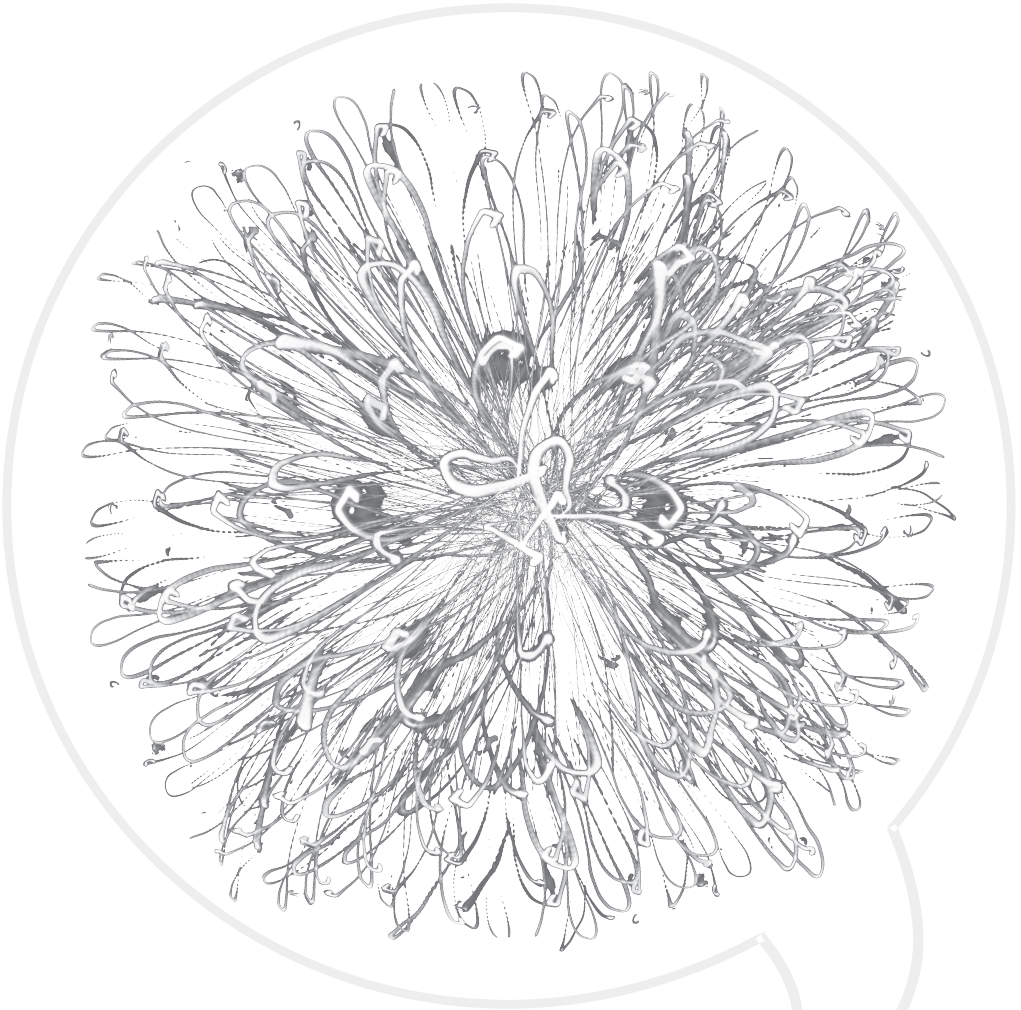

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY Through Language Study

A New Approach to Grammar Lessons

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FOREWORD

Language is never neutral. Even in a first-grade classroom, language embodies and reflects particular power relationships and sociopolitical realities. This point is powerfully rendered in *Celebrating Diversity Through Language Study*, a teacher's journey to self-awareness through language study with her young students. Walking what Jen McCreight calls "the tightrope . . . between celebrating language diversity and recognizing linguistic bias," this beautiful book tells the story of how a teacher can engage meaningfully with students on the many facets of language. While some educators may believe that the topics addressed in this book are too complicated for young children to appreciate, McCreight demonstrates not only that children *can* understand complex language issues but indeed that learning to do so can help young people make sense of the world.

Numerous educators and researchers have written about how a critical study of language can be used effectively with high school and college students. Bob Fecho's *Is This English?* (2004) and Hilary Janks' *Literacy and Power* (2010) are excellent examples. Vivian Vasquez's *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children* (2014) is one of the few that addresses language study and critical literacy with the very youngest students. *Celebrating Diversity Through Language Study* joins these books, providing another vivid example of how teachers can unleash the power of language even with young children. This book respects children as capable of learning about the intricacies of language, from creating their own terminologies to getting how language is used in different contexts. By using a variety of texts, whether translation charts created by children themselves or literature with which they can identify, the author describes numerous models of student-centered and caring approaches for teaching young children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Throughout the book, McCreight repeatedly makes the point that *context matters*. Where, when, for what purpose, and with whom one speaks all matter a great deal, an important concept for even young children to grasp.

If only this book had been around when I was a child in elementary school! Not only would I have benefited but my teachers would also have benefited. Rather than helping me understand how to negotiate language or celebrate my native language in school, my teachers instead taught me

to be ashamed of speaking Spanish and embarrassed about my Puerto Rican heritage. I wish I could say that things have changed dramatically in the past half century, but in many ways, they have not. While it is true that the situation has improved in many schools—particularly in places that support bilingualism and biliteracy, and in others where ELL classes are an integral and important part of a school—this is not the case in other places. Language diversity, if not a taboo topic in many of our schools, is often ignored. The very act of talking about language is a powerful strategy yet, given the rigid guidelines for teaching language arts that teachers have to follow, talking itself is discouraged in many classrooms. Children who speak languages other than English or varieties other than standard English are still regularly told to "leave it outside" or even forbidden to use their language altogether in school.

Jen McCreight's first-grade students were fortunate indeed, for they were encouraged to explore language in all its forms. In the process, they learned that no language is a deficit language but instead that language in whatever form is a valuable and valid means of communication that must be cherished. Likewise, teachers fortunate to read this book will learn from the insights, perspectives, strategies, and many vivid examples included. Teachers of all backgrounds who teach students of all backgrounds will love this book.

Sonia Nieto

INTRODUCTION

Mack finished reading aloud an excerpt from his family dialogue journal (as shown in the chapter epigraph), a compilation of letters written back and forth between families, students, and teachers as a way to share our classroom experience. This week, we wrote about people with different skin colors, asking our families, "When do you see people that look different than you in the world?" Mack's mother, Natalie, responded, "We all have different skin tones but can be part of the same nationality." As Mack read her words in his clear, high voice, his fingers grasping the sides of his journal, it was as if she were there in the room with us.

Dear family,
Some skin color is the same. But skin color is different.
I have skin color. Everybody has skin color.

As was our classroom practice, when Mack finished reading, he looked at his classmates and inquired, "Does anyone have any questions or connections?"

Hector's hand shot into the air.

"Hector?" Mack called.

Hector's eyes immediately filled with tears. The mood in the room became tense, as we all realized something was wrong, *really* wrong, with Hector.

These students and I had worked and learned together for their kindergarten and first-grade years, and we cared deeply for one another. I frantically tried to link bits and pieces of Hector's family and home life to Mack's journal but was unable to identify an immediate connection between Natalie's reference to different skin tones and Hector's mother, father, five-year-old sister, and infant brother.

"Someone called my house yesterday," Hector began. "He said that my family shouldn't be here because we don't speak good English, and that we should move back to Mexico. We're moving in February."

My thoughts began to whirl with phrases like "It's going to be OK" and "I know that must be so hard." Instead of saying them out loud, however, I

sat silently, realizing that language, a topic that had been at the crux of our classroom learning all year, was failing me.

After a moment of silence, somehow I spoke, if for no other reason than to not allow Hector to continue facing his unusually quiet friends.

"Hector, your home is *here*. You have a home in Mexico, but you have a home *here*." I connected Hector's pronouncement to Mack's journal entry, adding, "You know those people whom we've talked about who thought people with different skin colors shouldn't be together?"

Michael nodded vigorously, raising his hand and stating, "Yeah, it's just like that. Sometimes people don't like different languages, just like they didn't like different skin colors."

Christopher rose from Rest Stop (our classroom spot for engaging in contemplation, deep breaths, and quiet time to recover from stomachaches or homesickness). He quickly wound his way around rectangular tables and stray chairs and raised his hand even before he sat down.

The rest of the class sat wide-eyed as Christopher said, "Hector is my best friend. I don't want him to move! I came over here because he is sad and I want to hug him. I don't want him to move!"

Christopher swiftly rose and gave Hector a long, tight hug. I was thankful for the simple brilliance in this action. "We *all* love you very much, Hector. No matter what, you have a family in this classroom." Hector nodded bleakly, tears still on his face.

Inwardly, I wondered how Hector had heard this conversation, what threats had been made to his Spanish-speaking family, and whether I should contact anyone from his home to ask for some clarification.

Outwardly, I did the only thing I could think to do.

We had a hugging party.

We would be fine.

Right?

This story highlights the tightrope my students and I walked between celebrating language diversity and recognizing linguistic bias. While Hector's story was the first, students periodically told friends and teachers about a "bad man" who called the homes of "all people who spoke Spanish and who were from Mexico" to tell them to move back, "unless they had papers." Families prepacked bags and mothers told their children they might be moving to Canada. The possibility of these pending moves took up conversational space from morning meeting until recess.

Each time a single child shared, others made our classroom "connection" sign with their hands, their thumbs and pinky fingers held high to

indicate they had encountered something similar in their homes. Their experiences made the anti-immigration legislation sweeping across the country come alive.

Language Study

Students need the space and time to share stories like these, and when they enter a classroom, they deserve to know their language backgrounds will be honored, not silenced. Language study does just that: it honors students' home languages. Language study, in its simplest form, is a student-centered approach to grammar study. This approach has two main components: (1) to teach students how to negotiate the language they use based on *context* and (2) to build on *background knowledge* to make the study of words relevant for all children (see **Figure I.1**). Teachers can use it exclusively to teach grammar, or teachers can choose to embed language study into an already existing grammar curriculum.

For example, while completing grammar worksheets or diagramming sentences, students and teachers can discuss the contexts in which knowing these rules might be most useful. While learning the standardized English rule for the use of *is* versus *are*, a teacher could ask, "Where have you heard people using *is* and *are* in this way?" or "Would you be more likely to apply this rule when you are speaking with your friends on the playground or while giving a speech or writing an essay? Why?"

The earliest goal of language study is to bring together children's home and school language backgrounds. Students begin the year discussing and comparing and contrasting the language they already use with friends, family, and other adults and peers in settings like school. They create their own terminology (or metalanguage) to discuss the switches they make when speaking in a variety of contexts and with a variety of people. With this foundation, children begin to view their language backgrounds as important and connected to the school study of words. Teachers identify

Language Study Is . . .	Language Study Isn't . . .
a student-centered approach to studying language in use at increasingly in-depth levels	a set of prescriptive lessons to follow
based on the needs of the teacher and the students	one size fits all
an effective way to engage students across content areas	an add-on

FIGURE **I.1**
What Is Language Study?

mentor texts (either excerpts from children's literature or snippets of real conversations heard throughout the day) from which they can pull interesting examples of language for closer examination. Students begin to identify the purpose and function of conversations with a variety of people and in a variety of contexts (for example, with friends versus with principals or talking around the dinner table versus speaking at an assembly).

The Importance of Integrating Language Study into Our Curriculum

As the story about Hector makes clear, children's language is an intensely personal part of their lives, intertwined with their families, cultures, and experiences. As such, all students and teachers in the elementary grades, no matter their linguistic backgrounds, would benefit from a student-centered approach to language study. In fact, I would go so far as to say students and teachers *need* to incorporate some version of language study into their English language arts instruction, as a way to reclaim and *recontextualize* a subject area that is all too often taught without individual students and unique backgrounds in mind.

In all other subject areas, teachers acknowledge as best practice the necessity of building on prior knowledge. They comb the library shelves for books based on their students' interests and reading levels. They encourage children to write personal narratives when learning the concept of beginning, middle, and end. In social studies, teachers create businesses with products to sell to solidify the concept of goods and services. Even in mathematics, teachers create word problems that use their students' names or focus on topics in which the children are interested. We should approach the study of how words work in the world, then, in a similar manner.

Too often, the most critical stakeholders in education (students, teachers, and families) receive conflicting messages that undermine their ability to engage in meaningful English language arts learning. On the one hand, districts spend millions of dollars on standardized programs for language and literacy, complete with teacher scripts, grammar worksheets, discussion guides, and previously selected children's literature. These districts often expect their teachers to take these programs at face value, to replicate them because they are "scientifically based" and foolproof. Many times, teachers' schedules are mapped out prior to the beginning of the school year, so that they are being told not only *how* to teach content but *when*. Students and families are expected to fall in line, while rarely being asked

for their perspectives or input. The dissemination of these programs undermines the knowledge of the teacher, the individuality of each student, and the autonomy of families, at the cost of authentic connections between home and school.

On the other hand, educators are reprimanded for letting students fall through the cracks, for not reaching all children through individualized instructional methods. Families read and hear that they are not involved enough in their children's schooling. Students are written about as passive learners who need to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers know in their guts (and they are supported by the literature!) that children must feel invested in school to thrive there. They must believe school is interested in and values their home lives to meaningfully engage in curricular content. Further, families whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are different from those prized in schools feel isolated when they are *told how* to help their children learn, rather than being *invited to* the curricular table as partners.

There is no more personal topic that bridges the divide between home and school than language. Children live their home languages, experiencing them through lullabies and jokes and family stories, from the time they are born. Upon entering school, those who speak languages and dialects other than standardized English (Hudley and Mallinson 2011) are often asked to disconnect from them in favor of mastering the "correct" way of speaking. Rather than building on students' prior knowledge, celebrating linguistic diversity and the wonder inherent in multiple ways of speaking, grammar programs all too often silence home languages and dialects; in the process, they also silence children's lullabies, jokes, and family stories.

It is because of the intimate connection children and families have to their home languages that I believe it is essential for teachers, schools, and districts to reenvision language study. By linking language study to children's backgrounds, and by empowering teachers, students, and families to become actively engaged in this work, we will begin to shrink the disconnect so many children feel from school.

The Benefits of Language Study

When I began language study with my first graders, I had been teaching for seven years, in the thick of the standardized testing movement, and my students' linguistic backgrounds rarely matched the grammar found on these exams. I was passionate about teaching students how to code switch, or how to alternate between dialects or languages depending on

the context of a situation (Genishi and Dyson 2009). I originally focused on this largely because language questions on standardized tests measured only a students' ability to speak standardized English (Hudley and Mallinson 2011), the dialect spoken on television, in most books, and in workplaces around the country. While I believed that all children's home languages should be welcomed into written and spoken classroom discourse, the students I taught needed to know how to speak the language of power (Delpit 1995), and it was my responsibility to teach it to them. I agreed with Knapp and Watkins, who stated, "The more we know about what language is doing, the greater chance we will have to make it work for us as speakers and writers" (2005, 35).

Literature on language diversity supports this view. African American scholars such as Lisa Delpit (1995) and bell hooks (1989) have asserted their belief that all educators should teach their students how to speak standardized English, because they are at a distinct disadvantage if they use other home dialects or languages to write term papers, apply for a job, or construct a college essay. Delpit and hooks both cite conversations with African American families who agree with them, lamenting the fact that well-meaning European American educators often do not teach standardized English because they don't want their students to feel bad about their home languages. Historically, researchers have found that adults oftentimes consider a child who speaks African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Spanish as less intelligent than a child who speaks standardized English (Delpit 1995; Nieto 2002). Such prejudice follows these children into their teenage and adult years.

My students' experiences correlated with this larger body of scholarship. When I informally analyzed a first-grade language arts achievement test created by my school district, I was shocked to find that, although only one of the elements embedded in our state standards discussed grammar (subject-verb agreement), 20 percent of the district's test questions were language related. Of this 20 percent, which consisted of ten multiple-choice questions, 80 percent explicitly asked, "Which word *best* completes the sentence?" The creators of the test decided the best response was the answer that followed the rules of standardized English. Therefore, in the test's gross overrepresentation of one element covered in the first-grade standards, our district emphasized the weight of standardized English. It also made clear I needed to expose my linguistically diverse students to this powerful language. I found Hicks was correct when she stated, "Children must learn not only what to say and how to say it, but also when to say it"

(1995, 64) when learning how to negotiate the discourse of school. So, I made this exposure to standardized English my early focus.

Scholars such as Delpit (1995) and Nieto (2009) have wrestled with the best way to teach students standardized English, contemplating concrete ways to push back against the inconsistency present in a world that insists children must conform before they can stand out. As Linda Christensen, a European American who taught for thirty years in the inner city of Portland, Oregon, asserted,

> we must teach our students how to match subjects and verbs, how to pronounce lawyer, because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, have to use the language of the powerful to be heard. But, in addition, we need to equip them to question an educational system that devalues their life and their knowledge. If we don't we condition them to a pedagogy of consumption. (1996, 212)

In my earliest years of teaching, when I taught my students to code switch from their home languages and dialects to standardized English, I considered what such calls to action would look and sound like in my own classroom.

I began to realize that linguistic discrimination, whether presented through the questions on a standardized test or simply through teachers' lowered expectations, was common (Dyson 2001b; Hudley and Mallinson 2011; Schleppegrell 2010). My students and I were up against a wall—a wall made of mandates and societal pressure. I felt powerless to change the approach to grammar study that had so strongly embedded itself in schools, so I focused on activities that helped my young students understand the *relevancy* of learning how to speak standardized English (Gebhard, Harman, and Seger 2007). Similar to teachers in Heath's study *Ways with Words* ([1983] 1996), I used language detective journals to study words we used in different contexts. Based on the work of Wheeler and Swords (2004), my students and I created translation charts to practice moving back and forth between home and school languages. Similar to studying mixed-genre texts (e.g., historical fiction, a children's book with rhythm and rhyme), we discussed the overlap between forms of language we used in different contexts (Knapp and Watkins 2005). We focused on the importance of function and relevance in the midst of an educational environment that, at the institutional level, ignored the possibility or presence of linguistic diversity.

Yet I remained unsatisfied, as simply reconstructing the status quo does little to change it. Though I was on the lookout for opportunities to engage in action-oriented language work, I never knew just how much to delve into discussions on power structures and prejudice with six-year-old children.

Learning from Home Lives and Families

It was during my seventh and eighth years as a teacher, as I got to know the students in Hector's class, that I identified the gap I had intuitively felt. My students and I lived and learned in a southern university town, with 99 percent of our school community receiving free or reduced breakfast and lunch and most living in a rural area. I often heard roosters crowing on my way to work, and children whose families were from Mexico and South America (70 percent) mentioned in passing how they slaughtered chickens and harvested gardens in the backyards of their small, brightly painted trailers. Most of the African American (25 percent) and European American (5 percent) students resided on quiet, tree-lined streets lacking sidewalks, where they played in large grassy areas and waved to neighbors riding by on bicycles, far removed from the farms.

I was a European American female in my late twenties. I had lived a middle-class existence all my life. On paper, I was quite different from the students and families with whom I was working.

I began to realize that in my earlier work, students' most relevant linguistic models, the adults in their lives, were largely *under-* or even *un*represented in our discussions around code switching and the contextualization of language use. Therefore, asking these families to engage in conversations about language was essential; it was how I would learn the ways communication played out in their lives. I wished to better understand these families as individuals, rather than simply as part of a larger cultural group, so it was crucial that we cocreated a classroom where they felt we authentically represented their home lives. As Anne Haas Dyson stated, "the larger processes of children's lives always penetrate the space of schooling, although . . . they are not always recognized, acknowledged, or responded to" (2001a, 15), and it became my focus to build our language study on these immensely rich ties.

Research has continually shown that families bring a wealth of knowledge and resources to their children's classrooms. When school curricula honor, support, and expand this knowledge, they create vast opportunities for more inclusive linguistic curricula (Allen 2010; González, Moll, and

Amanti 2005; Henderson et al. 2007). My prior experiences with these families told me that they had a deep-seated interest in supporting their children in whatever ways possible, and it was my responsibility to invite their knowledge and experience into our classroom.

The teacher–researcher team of Solsken, Willett, and Wilson-Keenan (2000) wrote about their experiences in creating open spaces for hybrid, multilayered pedagogies to emerge through dialogue, and their honest recounting of this experience greatly affected my thoughts on home–school partnerships. They stated:

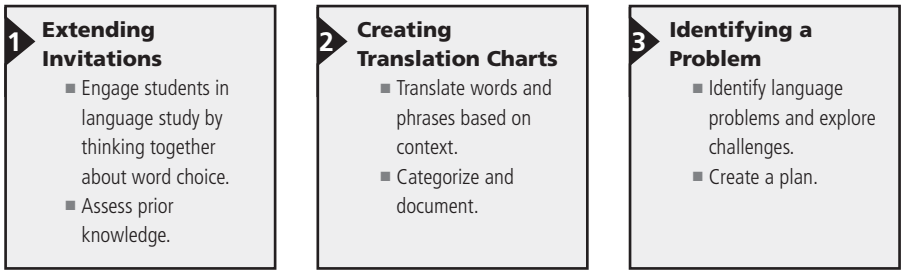
> By positioning the children and their families as hosts and teachers, we hoped a new sense of agency would emerge. By positioning ourselves as learners and interrogating our own practices and ideologies, we hoped to learn how to construct a more democratic, multicultural pedagogy. (181)

In other words, if I wanted to open up these partnerships, I had to remember that this was not my show. The goals of our language work could not be mine alone. The route we would take to reach these goals could not consist only of my ideas. A collaborative language study would emerge only through dialogue and a focus on hearing, understanding, and learning from one another (Freire 1972).

I began to open up our classroom doors in ways I had not done before. And in the midst of this, critical realizations about language use in classrooms began to emerge. We shifted the conversation in unexpected ways as we implemented home visits, interviews, family dialogue journal entries focused on language use, and invitations to share language (Allen 2007). We began by primarily considering the contexts in which we spoke, and we eventually moved toward contemplating the linguistic discrimination that Hector and others faced. With the support and input of our families, we identified possibilities for action. Our initial fear and uncertainty became an opportunity for educating others.

How This Book Is Organized

There are building blocks to language study (see the graphic that follows). You can incorporate this model fully into your classroom; you can choose to try out the first step or two; or you can choose to create and implement some variation of the activities and projects to best fit your students' needs, your comfort level, and your school environment. In each chapter you'll find



- a description of the building block;
- specific examples from my first-grade classroom and a third-grade classroom;
- a chart that offers details and suggestions for each building block across grades K–6; and
- ideas for strengthening family–school partnerships.

Each building block can stand on its own and is malleable enough to be reenvisioned and reformatted. I present them in sequential order, as they build on one another.

Chapter 1. Extending Invitations: Introducing a Language Study

Based on the work of Van Sluys (2005), invite your students to explore their use of language. In small groups, the children might examine photographs, children's literature, video clips, or advertisements and discuss how people might be using language in each context.

Chapter 2. Creating Translation Charts: "That's Not My Book Talk!"

Extending the work of Heath ([1983] 1996) and Wheeler and Swords (2004), you and your students can use charts as a tool to discuss how context influences word choice.

Chapter 3. Language Problem Solving: Identifying a Problem and Creating a Plan

As your discussions about language use increase, you and your students may recognize that not all ways of speaking are validated in spaces outside your classroom (e.g., libraries and library books, office buildings, on television). Responding to this, you will engage in a language-based form of creative problem solving (Treffinger and Isaksen 2005) by first working together to identify a problem and then mapping out a plan to address it.

Chapter 4. Language Problem Solving: Taking Action and Reaching Beyond the Classroom Walls

Once you identify a real-world problem and create a plan to address it, you will take action. Your language-oriented project will be unique to your students and their linguistic backgrounds and experiences. Examples from the classroom will help you envision how this might play out in your classroom.

Chapter 5. Celebrating Language: Sharing with Your Community

After engaging in a variety of activities and discussions around language in context, share what you have learned with the community. You can invite family, school, and community members to share in the celebration.

Chapter 6. Reflecting: Looking Back to Move Forward

After you complete a language study, it's time to reflect. Take time to consider how language study affects academic performance, student and family engagement, and your approach to teaching grammar and language.