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# Language and Power in the Classroom: An Interview with Harold Rosen

Starla H. Anderson and Syd Butler

For many years, Harold Rosen has been a pioneer in his teaching and research at the London Institute of Education. He is well known for his work with James Britton and others in the Institute's Writing Research Unit, which produced *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (1975), and for his contribution with Douglas Barnes to *Language, the Learner and School* (1969). In May 1981, Harold Rosen presented a keynote speech, "Language Diversity and the Linguistic Demands of the School" (published in the Fall 1981 issue of *Highway One*, *Journal of Canadian Language Education*) at the annual conference of the Canadian Teachers of English. This interview was conducted after his speech.

Butler: How important is it that children are able to use their own dialects in the classroom?

Rosen: It's a bit more complicated in a way, because most classrooms aren't set up for anybody to use anything really, except for answering the teacher's questions. In that setting, students' use of dialect is a non-question.

Butler: Is it possible to change the structure of the classroom?

Rosen: We can have a little devolution [of power] in the classroom and begin to hand some of the power to the kids. Then, of course, how you do that will affect which language code they will use, and there should be occasions when it should be a bit more formal. Once you begin to create the possibility for spontaneous use of language, unmonitored in the classroom, then students will be able to move across the spectrum of language codes. While a typical London "Anglo" moves up and down on the

continuum, other kids may be able to switch from one dialect to another. Kids have a dialect repertoire with the particular groups they come from. Black kids' first dialect, their D-1, may be London English or Cockney, but in certain situations, especially in a peer group with other black kids, they will switch to a black English dialect, or D-2. (Occasionally the group will include a white kid who can speak black English for certain purposes—storytelling, for example. You want to hear a black kid telling an Anansi story, using dialect in a way that it's used at home, a dramatic mode of talk.)

But too much attention has been given to the grammatical and structural features of dialect and not enough to the discourse features. We have a videotape at the Institute which shows a group of black kids dominated by one black girl—she's a London kid—thirteen years of age, with a repertoire of dialects and the ability to move from one to another. Everyone who watches this videotape agrees she is one of the most sensational girls. She was suspended from school because she failed right across the board.

Anderson: You mean she couldn't function in the school culture?

Rosen: She is too powerful for school. She exudes power. But the only person in school who is supposed to exude power is the teacher. Other people are not supposed to exude power. [Similarly,] a characteristic style of London working class kids is to engage in repartee, and they are extremely good at it. The feature of repartee is that you have the last word, which is exactly opposite to the rule of school, where

the teacher should have the last word. So teachers find it extremely threatening, even if the repartee is not meant to be hostile, until they learn to understand it and actually enjoy an occasional last word from one of the kids.

Butler: Would you say that it is the function of the school to give the kids the prestige dialects so they can have access to power?

Rosen: Well, there are two things. The first is that "prestige dialect" does not give you access to power. It may be a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition. Secondly, if it did give you access to power it wouldn't give everyone power because of the way power is organized in our society. The whole point is that some people will have more power than others. You can do it with a small number of kids who begin to succeed in the system. We've had universal education in England since 1870, and have we given all the kids Standard English? We can't get even the simpler features of their dialect changed because of the lack of power of the school against the force of community. It is only when a kid or the parents, or both, begin to pull away from the community that you can begin to change the dialect.

Anderson: To speak Standard English?

Rosen: There's no such thing as Standard—there are standards. The myth is that there is a single powerful process which is pushing people towards a single form of the language, but the evidence points the other way. Yes, there are old forms dying off, but new forms of diversification are occurring. With the great waves of speakers of other languages and dialects, there will be other changes.

Butler: If this diversification is a natural, inevitable process, does the school have to take an active, assertive role in maintaining a variety of dialects? Would you say it's linguistically sound, or pedagogically sound, or politically sound that a school has a policy of dialect maintenance?

Rosen: It's not very easy for a school to say that we're all in favor of maintaining dialects, that we like it very much when you use your dialect. I mean, schools vary in the particular distribution of kids. I think it's something much more subtle, or more sensitive, if you like. That's to say, the way you establish your school and run it will deliver the message to kids whether their dialect's okay. Let's take the clearest marked

case of this. If you take black dialect poetry in with black kids, it's electrifying. It's like something illicit has been brought in, pornography or something which they like but they don't expect to have in school. That's the first reaction and it gives you a reminder of the implicit messages of the school. Nobody said you shouldn't talk like that—the schools don't say that, but the kids still get the notion—it's not legitimate in this setting. And when you break through that, you get some extraordinarily good things happening. You get kids who are interested in the business of how you write others' dialects, and that poses all kinds of questions for them to raise their level of linguistic awareness. Fantastic.

Butler: Is it useful for the kids to learn to write in their own dialect?

Rosen: Well, I believe, if you're a person who is attempting to write Standard English, and all kids do, but you're also attempting to write your own dialect and to understand what the difference is in doing these two things, you will have a greater level of linguistic awareness than a kid who speaks Standard English and writes only Standard English. It's like when you learn a foreign language, you have another language to stand on to look at your own.

Anderson: If all dialects were equally valued in the classroom, would school success be equalized?

Rosen: I've thought a lot about this and so have my colleagues. There are a number of different aspects. Let's take the first one. If we're talking about a value, then the most important value is to value yourself as a member of your community. As soon as you begin to feel a despised, underprivileged, reduced person, then you weaken all your chances of doing anything. That seems to me the first point, how you value yourself as a person. Well, you might say that the kids get the message—"You will be valued when you do what we want you to do. Then we'll value you very highly." That's all part of the whole school rat-race business. It's a con—and it's a disgraceful con, really. Everybody knows it isn't a race in which everybody can be winners. Inevitably, some percentage—60 percent or 70 percent or 80 percent or 90 percent—could learn to speak like "Whitey" and it wouldn't make the least bit of difference because they can't all succeed in the present

school system. That's the first point that I want to stress very strongly.

I think that it's very hard to get across to people who have not had to change their code what it means to do it. And so you get all these bland comments like "Oh, the aim should be that they speak Standard so they're accepted in the wider society, and another dialect so that they're accepted in their own society. And everything in the garden will be lovely." I mean, it just isn't right. That doesn't even take into cognizance that dialects, and particularly where they're class associated, do not exist as separate enclaves—they actually clash, in an encounter with each other. There's always an interface between one dialect and the other. At its simplest, take somebody who goes along to the local education authority to complain about the education of his kid. He's a working class person and he's speaking to a typical clerk, a speaker of the prestige dialect. You're getting a clash there. And when you're finished with all that, you'll be thinking in narrower educational terms and pretending that we live in a just society and with a few adjustments here and there, it will all go, you know, very nicely. Well, that's another big lie, of course.

Butler: But do students need to master Standard English in order to succeed in society?

Rosen: Well, if we're thinking of kids learning to be masters of their own fate, a different matter from being socially mobile, learning how not to be put upon, what do we want? We want that they should have deeper understanding, learn to be critical, not to be accepting of things. Well now, why should you need to abandon your easiest speech for that? But what you do have to have is access to literacy. Now that, I am unambiguous about. I've said that it's very important that kids should write in black dialect but I've tried to stress that this is almost entirely for creative purposes, for expressive purposes. People talk about how they must learn Standard. But we ought to say, "Do you mean the standard written or do you mean the standard spoken?" We've had millions of speakers in our histories who were regional speakers, but they were great readers and writers of standard forms.

Anderson: Many teachers believe that the study of grammar is needed in the task of teaching standard written forms. What is your position

on this?

Rosen: Well, I would say that one of the most persistent myths in language education is that learning about language helps you to use it. If that were so, of course, the greatest writers in the world would be linguists. I've not noted that this is generally the case. By the same token, I should say that we may have many great writers who know nothing about the language whatsoever. Clearly, there are other processes at work which are fundamental processes in the mastery of standard written language, which is itself, I keep stressing, a very fluid medium. And that's why the teaching of grammar has been such a miserable thing. I mean, there's been one research report after another that has demonstrated this to be the case.

First of all, the children can't learn it because it's a very abstract system. And secondly, as far as they do, there is no relationship with their competency as users of the language, as was shown by that very good contrastive study by R.J. Harris at the University of London in 1962. When a kid has failed badly at learning to write, you're not simply dealing with somebody who is in the process of mastering the written system. You're dealing with somebody for whom language learning in general is a disaster area. Special help should be given to kids like that to help them articulate their own ideas and feelings. Otherwise, all the rest will be a failure because at best they will become nervous writers of five boring, correct sentences. What I'm saying is that special help must be based on helping them to express what they want to say, not on doctoring meaningless sentences. I'm not against the study of language but I would justify it on different grounds. We want kids to know about their world and how it works and language is very, very important in that world. Now that means that they should understand how language works in a society, and Chomsky's grammar won't tell them anything about that at all, however elegant a grammar it is. The study of language ought to be based on the language they have experienced. They should be active investigators of their own languages and dialects and make a study of that. They should take a look at language and sexism, they should take a look at generational differences in language, they

should look at stylistic differences in language. And although there will be no direct carry-over in the way they write, that heightened consciousness of language can offer some marginal help.

Anderson: How can teachers themselves get that heightened consciousness of language?

Rosen: Yes, that's the old question, isn't it? It seems to me we're in need of new designs and in-service work about language. We need approaches which make teachers actually excited about the richness of the language of the kids and themselves and other people. What I can't stand is when you get the local professor of linguistics who comes along and gives some great lecture about syntactic matter and other abstract features of English. He turns them off in five minutes, bores them. And they say, "If that's linguistics, you stuff it. I'm going back to the other stuff." But plenty of people are into language, not just linguistics. We always talk as though they have a monopoly on the study of language. What I'm saying is, teachers need to be excited about language, excited about the language of their kids. They must begin to understand what goes on in conversation, see how people use language to collaborate with one another, how to put each other down, begin to see language used as a system of control, all those things. Language and power and so forth. And they need to be made into active investigators.

Butler: That's probably even more important than the curriculum or even materials or textbooks. You were saying that kids need the opportunity to express themselves in their own dialect through the writing of stories and plays. On the other hand, when they come to use the shop manual, or study school textbooks, they have to work in the Standard language.

Rosen: Sure, but you see, what I always find a bit strange about all this is that the kids themselves are under no illusions—I mean, I don't care how badly a kid writes, if he's trying to write in history class, he's trying to write Standard. He's not trying to write anything else. Now he may in fact run into various dialect features, but it's not because he wants to. And you know, provided he's been made interested and provided he's got interesting material, he can learn "to look." Students need as much variety in what they read as possible. Look at the range

of languages in novels. The great learning task in reading and writing is appreciation of the variety of language dialects and the variety of functions in writing.

Butler: Is it important what sort of materials you use for teaching reading?

Rosen: You have to address yourself to the more general question of how you teach children to read and if you have what is a bad philosophy of the teaching of reading, then it doesn't matter whether you use dialect or anything else. They won't learn to read.

There's the work done by David McGuire on *Breakthroughs to Literacy*, a series where the kids make up extraordinary sentences and stories, the likes of which you won't see in any basal reader. And they read them. So, it isn't so much printed dialect or non-dialect, it's having something important to say and read. That's the first thing. The second is that most material put in front of kids who are learning to read is poverty stricken. It's language nobody uses anywhere and it's unrecognizable to the kids. The real bridge is between vernacular speech and formal Standard, and that's a very slow process. We ought to begin the teaching of reading by letting the kids recognize what they say on the printed page rather than trying to do two jobs at once—not only to decipher this other medium but also to get into another sort of language. We have rich material in all cultures. Nursery rhymes, for example. In much of the United States you can't begin them on nursery rhymes because you haven't had a scientific study of the distribution of the sounds and so on. The Russians don't worry about this. Straight away, they get kids into their famous nursery rhymes and folk tales. Even somebody like Beatrix Potter, famous for her children's stories, and they're very early stories, uses words like *soporific* all over the place; she relies on her intuition about kids' response to language.

What I'm saying is that the literacy factor is important and what we should ask ourselves is why working class kids don't learn to read and write as well as other class kids do.

Anderson: Basil Bernstein has been working on this question for many years. Does he provide any answers?

Rosen: No. What is missing in Bernstein's analysis is any notion that the contact between any dialects, codes, call them what you will, is a

very significant feature. Bernstein tried to bypass the whole issue of dialect saying, "I'm not talking about dialects, I'm talking about the order of meaning. It happens that they're speakers of dialect but that's not the point—the kinds of meaning they can deliver is what's at fault, not the dialect itself." But I think dialect *is* significant and the fact that dialect doesn't get into Bernstein's argument draws attention away from the significance of dialect.

Anderson: Teachers sometimes interpret Bernstein to imply that working class kids somehow are intellectually inferior.

Rosen: It didn't need Bernstein to make teachers contemptuous of working kids' language. They always have been. What he did was to give academic respectability to it, and that's a big difference. Just as most teachers never had a high opinion of the intelligence of working class kids, but I.Q. tests and scores gave their opinion a pseudo-scientific legitimacy.

Anderson: Do you think there's anything to this theory?

Rosen: Nothing whatsoever. The more I have acquaintance with it and its effects, the less I think there is in it. I think it's rather the biggest con that's ever been pulled.

Butler: Why do you think it is that middle-class kids usually take to reading more easily than working-class kids?

Rosen: In a way, middle-class kids hear literacy before they actually start on it. Once you become literate, your speech is never the same; there's no going back to a totally oral person. So a middle-class child hears literacy in speech. We have to make literacy in its early stages nearer to the speech of the working class kids. But it isn't a simple question of dialect or non-dialect. Getting into the written system is what it's about, and the fact that it's Standard is really a trivial fact. The larger problem is mastering this system, and that is a massive thing for kids to undertake. I'm quite unashamed in saying there is no threshold a child crosses at any stage of education that is so fundamental as learning to read because potentially, then, they are autonomous learners. Once you've got access to libraries, they can't control you.

Butler: So much of what you say comes back to this whole question of control. How can teach-

ers be more aware how their classroom practices affect their students' learning?

Rosen: There are no solutions which are formulae. They have to be related intimately to the conditions in which you are working. There are moments of crisis, the times when you are more easily convinced, teachers and others, and the kids, times when the system is creaking and cracking, when it is crisis-laden because the old formulae don't work anymore. When the kids are rebelling, they're just a little more open. What it amounts to is that special tensions are being set up. Special tensions lead teachers to look for new solutions, not because they happen to be a lovely bunch of teachers but because the old solutions are just manifestly not working.

Anderson: Our discussion has focused on questions of language use in the classroom and how a teacher's attitudes about language will affect students' learning. Very briefly, let's discuss other factors that inhibit children's success in school and in society.

Rosen: Oh, well, I mean, that's straight politics. It depends upon what you believe about politics, what you believe about the nature of the society you live in. It's simple. I mean, I'm a socialist and so I believe that we live in an unjust society because basically one class exploits another and until we have a classless society the best thing that can happen for ordinary kids in school is that they should learn about themselves and society. But I also believe that the educational system isn't constructed to do that. Obviously educational systems in any country are constructed basically to reproduce the system of that country. But fortunately for us, the system is too big, too untidy, too shoddy, in many respects, for anyone to totally succeed in doing what they want to do. Within our system, it's possible to find spaces but they don't just bloom like flowers. You have to fight for space and you have to defend that space like mad when you get it.

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