A Language They Can’t Read Just Yet: Code-switching to Improve Our Students Information Literacy

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Code-Switching

- The practice of “adjusting one’s language to fit a particular language community” (Amberg & Vause, 2009); can be done consciously or unconsciously
- Used to describe language shifts in bilingual speakers, but can also be used to describe dialect (a language used by a particular group) shifts
- Vocabulary, Pronunciation, and Grammar can all be adjusted to meet the expectations of a particular community
- Applies to speaking and writing

Formal vs. Informal Dialects

- Formal dialects (e.g. Standard English), spoken by those in power, see their status elevated
- Informal dialects (e.g. African American Vernacular English), spoken by smaller language communities, are stigmatized; perceiving them as “error-filled” limits what we think speakers can achieve
- All dialects are highly structured, meeting the specific needs of the communities that speak them; there is no objective measure to prove a formal dialect is better than an informal one
- Bound to a culture’s identity, members have a robust knowledge of native dialects; they may not perceive problems with the way they speak or write

Code-Switching & Information Literacy

- Many students—raised on the Internet—have developed a robust informal research dialect and are confident in their ability to speak it; this knowledge can be valuable, at least in satisfying everyday information needs
- Academic disciplines have more formal dialects of research—a dialect a lot of research (e.g. Project Information Literacy, the Citation Project, the ERAL Project) suggests students have trouble speaking; to succeed, they can’t always rely on their everyday, informal language
- Code-switching is necessary for success in college-level research; to select appropriate strategies, tools, and resources, students must learn academic conventions and expectations; they must also understand how purpose, audience, and context dictate their choices

Contrastive Analysis

- Corrective approaches to teaching assume one “right way” of doing research; contrastive approaches values the vernacular, building on it to expand students’ research repertoires
- Contrastive Analysis uses a scientific method (Collect and Examine Data, Describe a Pattern, Test Description, and Refine Description) to contrast and explain differences
- Should be used to describe how key aspects of the formal, academic research process differ from the informal, everyday process; similarities can be ignored
Further Reading


