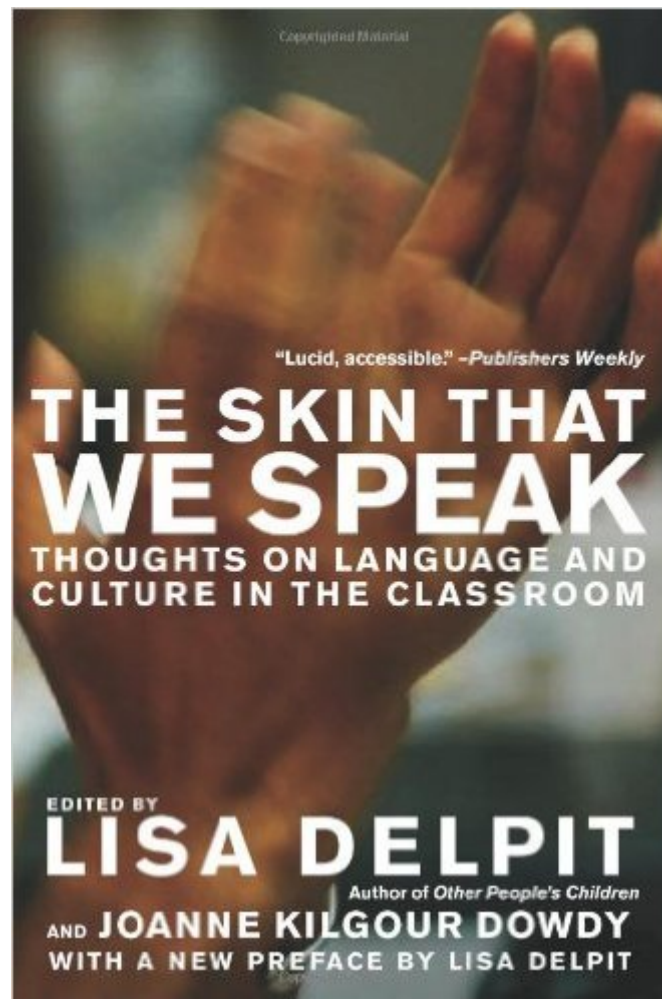


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# The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts On Language And Culture In The Classroom



## Synopsis

Now in paperback, *The Skin That We Speak* takes the discussion of language in the classroom beyond the highly charged war of idioms and presents today's teachers with a thoughtful exploration of the varieties of English that we speak, in what *Black Issues Book Review* calls "an essential text." Edited by bestselling author Lisa Delpit and education professor Joanne Kilgour Dowdy, the book includes an extended new piece by Delpit herself, as well as groundbreaking work by Herbert Kohl, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Victoria Purcell-Gates, as well as classic texts by Geneva Smitherman and Asa Hilliard. At a time when children are written off in our schools because they do not speak formal English, and when the class- and race-biased language used to describe those children determines their fate, *The Skin That We Speak* offers a cutting-edge look at crucial educational issues.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*The Skin That We Speak*, by Lisa Delpit, is a collection of essays written by various authors about the impact of language in the classroom. The author identifies the purpose of the book as the exploration of "the links between language and identity, between language and political hierarchy, and between language and cultural conflict." The book is divided into three sections starting with an individual inward look into languages, a examination of the consequences of language attitudes in the classroom, and finishes with a look at the language of teachers and what they need to know to become effective in the classroom. The author titled the book, *The Skin That We Speak*, because

"just as our skin provides us with a means to negotiate our interactions with the world - our language plays an equally pivotal role in determining who we are." For each of us our language becomes intimately connected to our identity. Overall, this was a good book. Because it was composed of so many short essays, it made the book easy to divide into sections and read it quickly. The essays were all very well written and easy to understand the authors' purpose and its connection to the book. IT contained a nice mixture of personal stories, research, and even some ideas that could be directly used in the classroom. I think that it would be an excellent book for all teachers, new and old, to read. It opened my eyes to all the different aspects of the English language that I never realized existed and how those aspects can affect all students in my classroom. It has caused me to reflect on how I use language in my classroom on a daily basis. This book has allowed me to realize how all students can struggle with language issues in so many different ways, and how we need to be sensitive to it as classroom teachers.

The Skin That We Speak is a collection of essays on issues around language, education and identity. While primarily focused on how home language effects the educational experiences of African-American K-12 learners, there are also articles on language and culture and identity in Britain and the Caribbean and on Latinos and other immigrants in the United States, as well as groups within the US who have strong regional accents (in rural Appalachia, for example.) I had imagined the book's focus to be exclusively on education - how students are academically successful (or not) based on their ability to speak and write in "standard english" (SE), with SE grammatical rules and enunciation and While this is a topic of some of the articles, others touch on issues of social class (most readily apparent in Britain, but also in the US as demonstrated with those speaking Appalachian accents as well as in the Caribbean) as well as on the larger question of "is there such a thing as 'proper English'?" Delpit and others don't provide an answer, and linguists would argue that there is no such thing as a "correct way" to speak a language, given the variety of dialects every language has. What is interesting, however, are the values and inferences people place on the way in which people speak, and the role public education plays in seeking to standardize speech and writing. To be sure there is value in this standardization, but Delpit asks "at what cost?" Specifically, at what cost to those who don't speak "the Queen's English"? Or "Standard American English?" Should students who speak a different dialect feel less intelligent or less worthy than others? Who gets to choose what is the "proper" way to speak, anyway? Are there ways to simultaneously validate the home languages of young people, while teaching them to "code switch" depending on the situation? (This last question was answered brilliantly in a pedagogical piece by

Judith Baker in which students became researchers in identifying the varieties of the different home dialects and deconstructing their rules.) While geared primarily towards primary and secondary educators, there was much that I took from the book. First I was struck by the ingenuity of the educators who wrote pieces on language in their classrooms. Clearly there is more going on in our public schools than critics would have us believe if this is any indication of the type of teaching, learning and critical thinking going on in these classrooms. Second, the broader philosophical questions around language, culture, identity and education's role (in both the secondary and university levels) was brought sharply into focus - it was a topic I hadn't really thought much about, but is one that warrants attention by everyone involved in education (from teachers to professors to parents of children in school). Lastly, the issue of how race and social class impact our perception of each other, while hardly a new topic (Shaw's *Pygmalion* and its film adaptation, *My Fair Lady* are examples of this), it is a powerful reminder of how wrong we are to judge and assume based on the speech and structure of another. An interesting read.

As someone who is interested in issues of culture and language, I gobbled up this book like candy! It is terrifically fun to read--as interesting and engaging as a novel. While most of the anecdotes recounted in this book concern the classroom, I think it is of equal interest to people who work with others of diverse backgrounds in medical, mental health, and other settings. I have recommended this to undergrads, grad students, professors and friends--they all love it!

An interesting look at differences in language -- accent, vocabulary, and dialect. This book explores the judgements that people, even young children, make when they hear a voice. Well-rounded and very pragmatic about solutions. Doesn't just say 'Oh, people shouldn't judge each other.' Because, like it or not, we do.

An essential read for every educator and member of society, period. The assumptions we carry with us are so limiting, yet devastatingly so when we pass them along unwittingly. Delpit is provocative, so be prepared to think and rethink many things about language in the classroom and society you take at face value.

This is a wonderful read for anyone working with children and families! Offering new perspective on how to look at race and culture! I would recommend this book to anyone working with children and families to take a different approach to working with these families!

I had to read this book for a class on studying diversity. I love books like this, and found it very interesting. I thought that it had some very valuable tips and classroom scenarios that some teachers overlook.

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