Discrepancies between “home English” and “school English” for urban students have been addressed for decades by a number of scholars in the fields of linguistics, education, and sociology (Baratz 1969, Baugh 1995, Charity et al 2004, Alim 2009, Edwards 2010). Those students who speak prestige varieties of English tend to do better in school settings, in which the teacher’s language is that of the mainstream middle class. Some researchers have examined the teachers’ contrastive analysis of non-prestige varieties of English with that of the prestige variety (Pandey 2000, Wheeler and Swords 2006), but there is a dearth of literature about classroom language strategies from the perspectives of both the teachers and the students.

This paper presents the linguistic situation in one Chicago high school in which most of the teachers hail from different dialect backgrounds from their students. In order to critically understand what teachers are trying to do in their interactions with their students, interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study in November 2010, and at the end of the study in June 2011. These interviews lasted 30-40 minutes, and were conducted with each teacher individually. Many of the questions in the first interview focused on relationship- and rapport-building strategies. The second interview questions focused more explicitly on the linguistic strategies teachers use in their classrooms, and thoughts the teachers had on the use of non-prestige dialect in their classrooms. The questions in the second interview also asked teachers to reflect on the classes under study.

Additionally, questionnaires were administered to the students regarding their teachers’ language use in the classroom. These questionnaires were meant to assess the effectiveness of the teachers’ language strategies from the students’ perspective, and to indicate whether the students’ and the teachers’ beliefs about what happened in the classroom were compatible.

Through the use of the two methods, a more complex picture of teachers’ language strategies is presented. Perceived use and rapport-building strategies are examined through the teacher interviews, while the effect of the teachers’ strategies is revealed through the student questionnaires. This type of study has the potential to expose linguistic tensions apparent in the mainstream urban American classroom, with the further possibility for discussion, demystification, and deconstruction of language ideologies and linguistic identities inherent in the makeup of urban societies.