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# Evaluating and Improving High School Students' Folk Perceptions of Dialects

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# Evaluating and Improving High School Students' Folk Perceptions of Dialects

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## 1 Introduction

Two pioneers of sociolinguistics, William Labov (1982) and Walt Wolfram (1993), have charged linguists to be proactive in disseminating scientific information about language to the general public. Public school systems are an attractive outlet for such outreach projects for a number of reasons. First, since most Americans attend these schools, school-based projects can reach a wide audience: potentially changing the knowledge or attitudes of a large portion of the next generation of Americans. Second, the audience in a school is largely a captive one, whereas other projects, e.g., television documentaries or museum exhibits, reach only a participant-selected group. Third, the formal teaching of sociolinguistic information in a classroom validates the academic legitimacy of it. Finally, research such as Lippi-Green (1997) and Smitherman (e.g. 1977, 2000) illustrates clearly the negative effects of language ideologies (see, e.g., Fairclough 2001) on the educational achievement of vernacular-speaking students. Teaching about language diversity may help undermine such ideologies of students and, perhaps even more important, classroom teachers. From a pedagogical standpoint, enabling teachers to teach about language diversity will affect their language ideologies more than attending a workshop on the topic or having a linguist teach the class as a guest speaker (Bligh 2000).

Entering the public school system is not, however, an altogether easy task, as districts are often highly bureaucratic, rigidly organized, and somewhat resistant to change. Because language use exists in the public domain and because there is no tradition of education about language diversity in the schools, it is difficult to convince many school administrators of the importance of such information. Instead, language arts programs are often built around established pedagogical approaches despite nearly 100 years of research demonstrating that these methods are not the best practices for educating students. In fact, the first president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Fred Newton Scott, recognized the importance

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\*I wish to acknowledge all who have contributed to the development of the curriculum described herein, especially Walt Wolfram, Jennifer Detwilder, Carolyn Temple Adger, Kirk Hazen, Andrew Grimes, Marge Wolfram, and Charlotte Vaughn. Video credits can be found in the curriculum itself.

of language variation to English instruction and advocated reevaluating and updating many traditional approaches even in 1908 (Carpenter, Baker, and Scott 1908). The NCTE, for its part, has continued along the progressive path advocated by Scott. For example, its *Students' right to their own language* position statement (CCCC/NCTE 1974) asserted (even before the Ann Arbor decision) that a student's dialect should not handicap academic progress. This thread also runs through the NCTE's standards for teacher preparation programs, which includes, "Teacher candidates must know how and why language varies and changes in different regions, across different cultural groups, and across different time periods and incorporate that knowledge into classroom instruction and assessment that acknowledge and show consistent respect for language diversity" (NCTE/NCATE 2003:11–12). Such knowledge is also included in the NCTE's program standards for the English language arts: students should "develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles" (NCTE/IRA 1996:3).

Despite the discrepancy between many state language arts standards and the progressive standards of the NCTE, it is still advisable that linguists wishing to conduct outreach programs in the public schools approach such relationships as cooperative rather than directive. It is naïve and presumptuous to assume that linguists hold all the answers and knowledge and must "save" teachers from their linguistic ignorance. In fact, many teachers are quite familiar with the educational implications of multiple dialects in the classroom but lack the tools or pedagogical strategies for accommodating these diverse dialects. Linguists, on the other hand, typically do not have the pedagogical strategies for developing lessons that are appropriate and useful for students. Most linguists also lack extensive experience with classrooms and students and therefore should view partner teachers' experiences and ideas as crucial to improving outreach projects.

While the majority of recent work by linguists in the public schools (e.g. Reaser, Adger, and Hoyle 2005, Sweetland 2006, Wheeler and Swords 2006) all began as unequal partnerships (as did the curriculum examined in this study), I can confidently say that all of these projects have been greatly improved by input from classroom teachers who have reviewed, piloted, or contributed materials. The same is true of the curriculum examined in this study (Reaser and Wolfram 2005), which has had contributions from linguists, teachers, and curriculum reviewers over nearly twenty years.

This study reports findings from a piloting of the *Voices of North Carolina* (Reaser and Wolfram 2005) dialect awareness curriculum in Johnston County, NC, in fall of 2005. In it, I will begin to answer the following questions: What do adolescents already know (or think they know)

about language and language variation? Does direct instruction about language diversity affect adolescents' knowledge of and attitudes toward dialects? To what extent are the language attitudes of adolescents malleable or fixed? Can different teachers equally and effectively teach about language variation? Do different groups of students (e.g. boys and girls) respond to information about dialect variation in similar ways?

## 2 Summary of the *Voices of North Carolina Curriculum*

The *Voices of North Carolina* curriculum is a 450-minute, multimedia, dialect awareness curriculum. Thus, it requires approximately two weeks of teaching in a standard classroom or one week in a block-schedule classroom (the norm in North Carolina). One of the important and unique aspects of this curriculum is that it dovetails with North Carolina's Standard Course of Study for eighth grade social studies (see Reaser 2006 for examples). This is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that teachers can use the curriculum to meet educational standards instead of teaching about language in addition to other standards. Social studies, as opposed to language arts, is targeted because the thrust of the curriculum—the connections between culture and language of different groups—fits better within the established curriculum that requires students to learn about the history and culture of North Carolina. Language arts, on the other hand, tends to focus more on instruction in prescriptive writing norms. This suggests another reason why targeting the social studies curriculum is advantageous: it avoids potential tension between recognizing the validity and purpose of non-standard dialects and the insistence on the use of prescriptive language in standardized testing situations.<sup>1</sup> Also, the lack of high-stakes testing in social studies increases the likelihood that teachers would be willing to teach the curriculum than would be the case if it had been designed for a language arts classroom.

The curriculum materials consist of a 122-page teacher manual, which includes answer keys, background information, teaching tips, twelve short and accessible articles about dialects, optional quizzes, and seven pages of optional overheads. The student workbook contains only forty-three pages. This difference reflects an attempt to help construct the teacher—who is likely learning the material as he teaches it—as opposed to the textbook, as

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<sup>1</sup>Sweetland (2006) meets this challenge by demonstrating that education about dialects does not negatively impact standardized writing scores but, in fact, may contribute to an larger increase in writing ability than traditional instructional methods including the widely used *Writing Process* method.

the content expert. Students are given skeleton-style note-taking worksheets instead of the textual information that most textbooks provide. Thus, they must get their information from the teacher as opposed to the text. The curriculum also includes two DVDs containing twelve video vignettes (to accompany workbook activities) and twenty-four audio tracks for six listening exercises. They also contain two interactive maps that detail important settlement and cultural information. The DVDs provide much of the content for class discussion, which enables teachers without a linguistic background to be able to teach the curriculum. Vignettes are typically between six and nine minutes in length, which is a reasonable amount of time for adolescents to focus, and provide small enough chunks of information that teachers can lead a discussion without being overwhelmed or overlooking key information.

### **3 Measuring Language Attitudes and Knowledge**

One of the challenges in determining the effectiveness of a curriculum such as the one just described is the fact that there are relatively few metrics available for quantifying the seemingly nebulous attitudes and knowledge that adolescents have about language. Orlando Taylor (1973) developed a metric for assessing teachers' attitudes of African American English, but this is not readily extendable to all dialects nor appropriate for student responses as this study requires. Metrics designed for students tend to examine the student's perceptions of individual ability e.g., whether a student believes he or she is a good writer (e.g. Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick 1997) and do not measure attitudes toward language variation. Without a readily adaptable metric available, one was created from scratch. Twenty psychometrically valid, Likert-type survey statements about language were developed for the piloting. Students responded to these statements by circling a response from "one" ("strongly agree") to "four" ("strongly disagree"). There was no "neutral" response as this confounds analysis. In order to allow for the inclusion of knowledge-based statements, the survey also included a response of "five," which corresponded to "don't know." The individual survey items will be discussed below.

The pre-curricular survey also collected basic demographic information about the students including gender, age, race/ethnicity, place of birth, first language, and other languages spoken. The post-curricular survey contained the same twenty survey statements but also four free-response questions about the unit: 1. What was the most surprising thing that you learned about dialects? 2. What did you learn about dialects that changed the way you think about language? 3. Why do you think many people have such negative

opinions of dialects? What can be done to change these attitudes and opinions? 4. Do you think it is important to study different dialects? Why or why not?

#### **4 Sample**

The data for this study come from 129 ninth grade students at Clayton High School, who completed both the pre- and post-curricular surveys in November, 2005. They were taught the *Voices of North Carolina* by their regular classroom teachers, none of whom had any prior experience with the curriculum or any training in dialect awareness. All students were taught the curriculum in their honors English classes.

Clayton is located in Johnston County, approximately twenty-five miles east of Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina. Johnston County has traditionally been a rural county when compared to neighboring Wake County, where Raleigh is situated. Recently, the population of Johnston County has increased dramatically, fueled mostly by the development of the Research Triangle Park, roughly thirty-miles west of the County. Between 1970 and 2000, the population doubled from about 60,000 residents to 120,000 residents ([www.uscensus.gov](http://www.uscensus.gov)), resulting in the county's becoming more urban and affluent, though it should not be considered an urban community. Johnston County has a larger percentage of Hispanic residents than neighboring counties, though it has fewer African Americans.

#### **5 Analysis of Students' Pre-Curricular Responses**

Table 1 summarizes the responses of the 129 students to the pre-curricular survey. The data are ordered from the statement with the strongest agreement at the top to the statement with the strongest disagreement at the bottom. A score of 1.0 would indicate universal "strongly agree" responses while a score of 4.0 would indicate universal "strongly disagree" responses.

A number of pertinent observations can be made based on the data in Table 1. First, the statement to which the most students responded was, "14. Students should be punished for using anything other than Standard English," to which only three students responded "don't know." Perhaps not surprisingly, students overwhelmingly disagreed with this statement (only two students agreed at any level), but similar results may be expected for most statements suggesting students should be punished.

statement	average response	total responses
6. I speak a dialect of English	1.76	114
1. Everyone should know and be able to use Standard English	1.77	125
16. It is important to be able to use both Standard and non-standard dialects of English	1.88	115
15. There are good reasons for using non-standard varieties of English	1.90	111
17. Standard English is the best language variety to use at school	2.05	111
7. I can speak more than one dialect of English	2.29	94
3. Some people are too lazy to learn Standard English	2.42	119
13. Students need to master Standard English to be successful in life	2.43	120
20. People who have a "Hispanic accent" speak Spanish and are still learning English	2.69	109
9. There are people who do not speak a dialect	2.71	97
11. Dialects should never be used in writing	2.81	122
2. Everyone should speak Standard English every time they talk	2.87	121
18. Standard English is the best language variety to use with my friends outside of school	2.87	122
5. Dialects are sloppy forms of English	2.89	116
8. Dialects do not have patterns	3.00	93
12. Professional authors would never use non-standard English	3.06	114
19. Dialects can never be more useful than Standard English	3.08	104
4. There is never a good reason to speak a dialect	3.36	106
14. Students should be punished for using anything other than Standard English	3.59	126
10. I think people who speak dialects are not very smart	3.59	119

Table 1: Summary of aggregate student data from the pre-curricular survey



The statement to which the second most number of students responded was, "1. Everyone should know and be able to use Standard English." This high rate of response and the strong agreement with this statement might be attributable to the fact that the responses come from honors level English students. It remains to be seen whether mainstream students would respond in a similar way.

There were three statements to which approximately a quarter of the students responded, "don't know." These are, "8. Dialects do not have patterns"; "7. I can speak more than one dialect of English"; and "9. There are people who do not speak a dialect." These statements require knowledge about what a dialect is or how they work in order to be answered properly. The fact that so many students did not feel comfortable asserting knowledge of them, and the fact that many of the students who did answer them answered incorrectly (e.g. nearly half of the respondents agreed that there are people who do not speak a dialect), underscores the need for education about sociolinguistic information in schools.

Despite not being aware that everyone speaks a dialect (statement 9, above), students were generally aware that they themselves speak a dialect (statement 6). In fact, only twelve students disagreed with this statement. Interestingly, these twelve students were all whites and from North Carolina (3), Ohio (2), California (2), Florida (2), New York (1), Oregon (1), unreported (1). With the exception of North Carolina, all are areas that are often reported as being dialectally "neutral" or at least unmarked. Being a minority or Southerner appears to coincide with recognition that you speak a dialect.<sup>2</sup>

Students report understanding of the importance of style-shifting, as is evidenced by the responses to statements 12, 16, 17, and 18. This is important because it lessens the potential tension that could arise between vernacular and mainstream varieties, as described in Section 2.

Finally, students did not associate dialects with intelligence, or at least they did not feel comfortable expressing this belief (statement 10, 3.59). Laziness, however, was a more common response (statement 3, 2.42). Interestingly, no student answered, "don't know" to both of these questions. It is possible that students did not feel comfortable claiming they could judge the intelligence of someone despite the fact that statements connecting language and intelligence are quite common in folk linguistic studies (Niedzielski and Preston 2000). Further, on the post-curricular survey, many students reported

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<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that native North Carolina residents make up 56% of the survey, and, thus, even with three respondents from NC claiming they did not speak a dialect, the vast majority of NC residents were aware that they spoke a dialect.

that one of the surprising things they learned was that you cannot, in fact, judge a person's intelligence by how they speak. This reveals a limitation of the survey. While it is impossible to know whether the data are reflective of the students' true, probably unconscious, attitudes toward language, it is reasonable to conclude that students' attitudes are, at the very least, no more tolerant than reported on the survey. That is to say, students are more likely to provide a false answer in the direction of tolerance than intolerance. Consequently, any real change in post-curricular responses is likely to be no smaller than the observed value.

## 6 Analysis of Students' Post-Curricular Responses

Student responses to the post-curricular survey reveal a positive effect on students' language attitudes and knowledge. The means for all twenty survey questions shifted in the direction of increased knowledge or more tolerant attitudes. Seventeen of these changes were significant ( $p < .02$ ) as determined by a series of twenty paired *t*-tests; all but statements "10. I think people who speak dialects are not very smart"; "14. Students should be punished for using anything other than Standard English"; and "16. It is important to be able to use both Standard and non-standard dialects of English." These statements received tolerant or knowledgeable responses on the pre-curricular survey and thus had little room to improve—though each did improve slightly using population analysis rather than sample statistics (which is certainly justifiable).

In addition to being more knowledgeable and tolerant on the post-curricular survey, students were also more confident in their responses. All twenty survey statements received fewer "don't know" responses than on the pre-curricular survey. In total, there were 58% fewer "don't know" responses on the second survey than the first, which is equivalent to nearly ten more responses to the average statement.

The survey items that had the largest improvements were those related to language knowledge. In order, the statements with the largest changes were, "9. There are people who do not speak a dialect"; "2. Everyone should speak Standard English every time they talk"; "20. People who have a 'Hispanic accent' speak Spanish and are still learning English"; "5. Dialects are sloppy forms of English"; and "8. Dialects do not have patterns." These statements all require knowledge about how language works in order to be answered properly. The large improvements in the mean responses for these items suggest that students did, in fact, learn information about language from the curriculum.

Responses to the post-curricular survey statements were generally less diverse than on the pre-curricular survey. The average standard deviation dropped from 0.72 to 0.66 on the post-curricular survey. This suggests that not only did students improve knowledge or attitudes (as is indicated by the change in mean), they increasingly clustered around the desired responses. There were six survey items which had an increase in standard deviation (statements 1, 7, 12, 15, 16, and 17). However, in some of these cases, the increase in standard deviation reflects a shift of responses clustered on misinformation or intolerant attitudes to more diverse but knowledgeable or tolerant responses: still a desired outcome. Figure 1 summarizes these results.

Space restrictions do not permit discussion of students' responses to the open-ended questions. Such a discussion can be found in Reaser (2006).

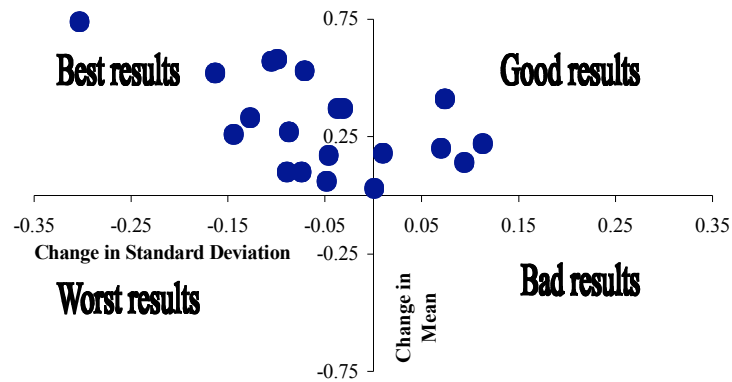


Figure 1: Summary plot of post-curricular student responses

### 7 Analysis by class/teacher

One of the research questions posed in the introduction was whether or not the curriculum can be taught effectively by different teachers. In order to begin to answer this question, the five classes of ninth graders are analyzed individually and compared.

A brief mention of the teachers' backgrounds is useful. All three are white females. Teacher 1 has been teaching high school English for fourteen years whereas Teachers 2 and 3 have been teaching for only four years each.

Teachers 1 and 2 taught the curriculum in two classes whereas Teacher 3 taught the curriculum in only one class.

Analysis of the classes' pre-curricular attitudes and knowledge reveal that, generally speaking, the aggregate attitudes and knowledge in each class is equivalent to the other classes. In fact, a series of twenty ANOVAs revealed that seventeen of the twenty statements (all but 2, 3, and 20), had means that could be considered statistically identical ( $p < .05$ ) across all five classes. This suggests that adolescents' language attitudes and knowledge may be relatively uniform, at least within a single school. This is not to say that students in other parts of the country have similar language attitudes and knowledge, however.

Responses to the post-curricular survey were as uniform as the ones on the pre-curricular survey: results from a series of twenty ANOVAs suggest that all but three statements (2, 5, and 17) had means that could be considered statistically equivalent ( $p < .05$ ). The fact that two of the three statements that had different means on the pre-curricular survey had equivalent means on the post-curricular survey suggests that the curriculum can help overcome some initial differences in knowledge or attitudes.

The adjusted average change per statement, by class, is given in Table 2. The individual means are adjusted such that all changes in the direction of increased knowledge or tolerance are positive whereas changes in the opposite direction are negative. The numbers reported are the averages of the adjusted means for each individual survey statement.

	adjusted average change per survey statement
teacher 1, class 1	.33
teacher 1, class 2	.34
teacher 2, class 1	.21
teacher 2, class 2	.29
teacher 3, class 1	.37

Table 2: Adjusted average change per survey statement by teacher and class

Despite the minor differences in the adjusted average change among classes, all teachers had a positive effect on the language attitudes and knowledge of their students. Although it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the three teachers were roughly equally equivalent in their abilities to teach the curriculum, the analysis above suggests that it is the curriculum,

not the teacher, that is the crucial component in affecting changes. More data is needed from other piloting to know the true effect of the teacher.

Another important observation can be made based on the data in Table 2: the two teachers who taught the curriculum twice (Teachers 1 and 2) achieved better improvement in their second classes. While it is possible that this difference is related to the composition of the class, it is probable that this improved effectiveness is a result of the teachers being more familiar with the material the second time teaching it. At this point, it is impossible to know whether all teachers would demonstrate similar improvements if they were to teach the material multiple times and how many repetitions it would take to reach the maximum threshold for improvement measurable by the survey. At the very least, given the successful piloting of the curriculum reported here, it is encouraging to imagine that, with some practice, teachers may be able to teach this material with even more effective results!

## 8 Analysis by Student Sex

Another important question in determining the effectiveness of the curriculum (as well as indicators for improving it) is whether or not groups of students responded to the material in similar or disparate ways. It is no secret among educators that girls and boys learn in different ways (see, e.g., Gurian, Henley, and Trueman 2001), and it is desirable to create educational programs that reach both sexes effectively.

The responses of boys and girls to the pre-curricular survey suggest that the two groups have remarkably similar language knowledge and attitudes: boys had an average response of 2.66 compared to the girls' average of 2.64. There was no significant difference between the groups' responses to any of the survey statements. However, 14.9% of the girls responded, "don't know" on average to each survey question compared to 8.9% of the boys. This difference (6.0%) is significant and suggests girls were more cautious or uncertain than boys on their pre-curricular responses.

The responses to the post-curricular survey revealed that, again, the attitudes and knowledge of the boys and girls were essentially identical with an average for the girls of 2.91 compared to 2.88 for the boys. Using a comparison of adjusted averages confirms that the girls and boys responded to the curriculum in nearly identical ways. The adjusted average increase per survey statement for the girls was 0.32 compared to 0.29 for the boys: a non-significant difference.

More interesting, perhaps, is that the girls' responses to the post-curricular survey suggest that the girls' confidence in responding to questions was significantly better than on the pre-curricular survey. On this

measure, the 6.0% gap observed on the pre-curricular responses shrunk to 1.6% (5.8% of girls' responded "don't know" compared to 4.2% of boys). Thus, since the reported attitudes and knowledge of boys and girls on both surveys were similar and both groups were more confident, tolerant, and knowledgeable on the post-curricular survey, it appears that the only gender difference is that the girls' confidence was affected more positively than the boys' confidence (9.1% versus 4.7%) as a result of the curriculum.

Another gender difference emerges from the responses to the fourth free-response question, "Do you think it is important to study different dialects? Why or why not?" While around 88% of the population responded in the affirmative to this question, the dissention came overwhelmingly from the (white) males: 25% of the boys (13/52) compared to only 3.9% (3/77) of the girls responded that it was not important or only "sort of" important to study information about dialects. This finding is not as alarming as it might appear, as research has found that boys often respond more negatively to questions about whether education is important (Reis and Callahan 1994).

Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the change in the adjusted averages of boys who did not think the curriculum was important (0.26) does not differ substantially from boys who did (0.32) or girls (0.32). It was the boys who thought the curriculum was only "sort of" important that had the smallest change in adjusted average (0.10). Thus, one potential improvement to the curriculum (especially as it relates to educating adolescent males) would be to stress the importance of real-world implications of the material early in the curriculum so that there are fewer students who adopt a position of indifference toward the material's importance.

Reaser (2006) contains similar analyses of students by ethnic group, but due to space considerations and the relatively small numbers of ethnic minorities in the sample, this analysis is excluded from this report.

## 9 Conclusions

What can be concluded about the folk linguistic attitudes of adolescents and how linguists can help improve them? First, the attitudes of the students were, generally speaking, more tolerant than expected, given the prevalence of linguistic prejudice that is apparent in modern America. While it is possible that some of this tolerance may be a product of students' being conditioned to respond negatively to discrimination, students did respond in a way that suggests they understood, for example, the importance of style-shifting and of being linguistically savvy. It is also apparent that differences between groups of students are less than the similarities between groups. While there are some ethnic and regional differences among respondents,

generally the attitudes and knowledge of these students can be thought to be relatively homogeneous, at least among the population examined. Further, these groups responded in similar ways to education about dialects, suggesting that adolescents' ideologies are still malleable, and teachers without a background can help improve attitudes if provided with the right materials.

While there are many questions that need more research, such as whether these results would be consistent outside this region or with more ethnically diverse classes, this study does suggest that direct education about language variation can have a number of positive influences on the language knowledge and attitudes of adolescents. Judging by a response from one of the cooperating teachers, it seems that such programs satisfy not only Labov's and Wolfram's directive to seek outlets by which linguists can benefit the general public, but also the critical need that educators perceive: "Thanks for such an edifying experience in teaching the dialect unit. I really think the students got a lot out of it (not the least of which was the challenging of a lot of stereotypes they might have had that are tied to language). I know it was enlightening for me and I truly enjoyed it."

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