

Chapter 13

Promoting US–Based Pre–Service ESOL Teachers’ Understanding of Language Variation in Multidialectal Settings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the elements of a course unit on language variation within a culture and education ESOL course intended to support the development of pre-service elementary education teacher candidates’ awareness of language variation writ large and, more specifically, their knowledge concerning the nature of American English dialects, along with their understanding and appreciation of their future students’ home dialects/languages. The chapter begins with a discussion of various theories that frame the course unit (challenging language norms, heteroglossia, critical applied linguistics, language-as-problem/right/resource, and language variation) and provides an overview of several prevailing attitudes concerning dialectical variation and how the course unit works to counter these narratives. The chapter then highlights the resources, activities, and assignments that constitute the course unit along with an examination of how and why they are included and utilized in the unit.

INTRODUCTION

Norms are behaviors that are often presumed to be conventional and seen as given because the majority of members of a given social community exhibit and demonstrate these behaviors. Chitadze (2022) defines norms as “generalized standards of behavior that once accepted shape collective expectations about appropriate conduct” (p. 40). Norms are used both explicitly and implicitly in regards to a variety

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of phenomena, including language. People frequently hold specific assumptions about ways in which others use language depending on the contextual factors of the communities in which they live. One could logically claim, for example, that the standard language norm in the United States is monolingualism since the practice of learning languages other than English is not consistently valued or promoted. More specifically, in the case of English learners, a common misperception is that their multilingualism is a deficit that prevents them from learning English, an assumption which is commonly advanced more for political and social reasons than pedagogical ones. This also holds true for minority language students who come to school speaking a myriad of varieties of (American) English; these students are often expected to reject the linguistic norms of their home dialect(s) and instead embrace and adopt the linguistic norms of standard American English (SAE).

Due to a variety of educational and societal factors, many teachers in elementary and secondary classrooms exclusively teach their students SAE due to their misguided and misinformed perception that this dialect equates to “proper” English, and they frequently endeavor to eliminate non-SAE features from the linguistic output of their students. Doing so, however, may signal to students that they are expected to assimilate to mainstream (white, middle-class, etc.) culture and that their linguistic (and cultural) identities do not matter. Such an approach treats all students as if they are monolingual and monocultural and neither acknowledges nor capitalizes on their cultural or linguistic funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Many such teachers have not studied the linguistic features of other varieties of American English and, consequently, have not learned to understand or value the linguistic diversity currently existing in the United States and in their own classrooms. Additionally, in order for students to be empowered to find their voice through their linguistic repertoire, teacher candidates should be educated about such issues in their educational preparation programs so that they develop an understanding and appreciation of the complexities of this issue and are equipped with specific strategies and techniques to create and foster a classroom environment that both supports and teaches students about linguistic diversity. Consequently, the goal of the proposed chapter is to attempt to suggest a possible remedy to fills this curricular (and societal) gap.

The chapter provides an overview of the specific activities and resources included in a course unit on dialectical variation in order to provide other educators with one possible blueprint for incorporating linguistic variation into course and program curricula. One of the principal goals of this course unit is to educate pre-service teacher candidates regarding the linguistic and culture nature of dialectical variation in order to provide a possible and viable antidote to the dilemmas outlined above. The ultimate goal of this course unit, thus, is to develop teacher candidates’ linguistic awareness concerning the nature and evolution of language variation more generally and dialectical variation more specifically. Fairclough (1992) defines language awareness as “conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education” (p. 1). Bolitho et al. (2003) characterize language awareness as “a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (p. 251). These definitions highlight the notion that language awareness involves learners’ appreciation for and understanding of the organic nature of language and the ways in which language is used in context to achieve personal and professional aims. Advancing such awareness is not only important for language learners but for language educators as well.

Numerous scholars agree that it is incumbent upon educator preparation programs to produce a cadre of teachers who are linguistically aware and are cognizant of the educational, political, and social ramifications of language use. For example, García (2017) contends that developing educators’ language

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