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MODERN ENGLISH DIALECTS AND EDUCATION

У статті досліджується проблема ставлення у школах США до учнів, котрі розмовляють на діалектах, а також те, як впливає подібне ставлення на їхню успішність. У статті також розглядається програма діалект-обізнаності як ефективний спосіб подолання проблеми діалектів в освіті.

Ключові слова: стандартна англійська мова, діалект, мовна меншість, школярі, що розмовляють на діалектах, програма діалект-обізнаності.

В статье исследуется проблема отношения в школах США к ученикам, которые разговаривают на диалектах, а также то, как влияет подобное отношение на их успеваемость. В статье также рассматривается программа диалект-осведомленности как эффективный способ преодоления проблемы диалектов в образовании.

Ключевые слова: стандартный английский язык, диалект, языковое меньшинство, ученики, разговаривающие на диалектах, программа диалект-осведомленности.

The article deals with the attitudes in U.S. schools and the way those attitudes can impact the effectiveness of teaching to non-standard dialect speaking students. The dialect awareness program as an effective way of problem solving.

Key words: *standard English, dialect, language minority, nonstandard dialect-speaking students.*

Language varies over time, across national and geographical boundaries, by gender, across age groups, and by socioeconomic status. When the variation occurs within a given language, we call the different versions of the same language dialect.

Every language has a prestige dialect associated with education and financial success. The prestige dialect in the United States is known as Standard English, and it is spoken by a large number of people. Students who want to succeed academically have good reasons to shift from their home dialect. This motivation continues in the workplace, where employers deem non-standard home dialects unacceptable for many positions.

Linguists have been arguing for years that all languages and dialects are equal. K. Hamilton [2] summarizes the views of several linguists working to end language discrimination in the U.S. as arguing that language discrimination is the result of Americans' negative attitudes toward non-standard dialects of English. Further, these linguists explain that the attitudes are based on the public's basic misperceptions of how language actually works. W. Wolfram explains in Hamilton's article that the "most elementary principle in linguistics is that all language is patterned and rule governed, and you can apply that principle to African-American English, to Appalachian English, to every other dialect we look at" [5: 278]. For linguists, the goal is to end language discrimination by changing the public's negative attitudes toward English dialects. This is accomplished through educational programs designed to bring awareness to the organization and logic in other dialects, and dialect awareness programs have already shown some effectiveness in their ability to increase one's knowledge of differences in English dialects. J. Siegel cites several dialect awareness programs (also referred to as contrastive approach or awareness approach) implemented in a few U.S. schools and colleges which have had success in both raising test scores and improving the feelings of minority dialect speaking students [3: 165]. But the goal of Dialect Awareness Programs is to change the negative attitudes toward non-standard English dialects, and it is here that their effectiveness is questioned.

The aim of this article is to consider the attitudes in U.S. schools and the way those attitudes can impact the effectiveness of a teacher teaching to non-standard dialect speaking students. Then we look at the dialect awareness programs and examine how their structure can effect attitude change.

The role language plays in personal and cultural identity has motivated numerous well-meaning educators to argue that schools in the USA should not teach Standard English or expect students to master its convention. In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution proclaiming that students have a right to their own language and arguing that conventions of Standard English should be abolished because they are elitist and discriminatory [4: 224].

The NCTE resolution is in stark to the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) resolution of 1981: "Whereas speakers of nonstandard English should be have the opportunity to learn Standard English and teachers should be aware of the influence on nonstandard English on the acquisition of Standard English, and whereas TESOL is a major organization which exerts influence on English language education throughout the educational

community, be it therefore resolved that TESOL will make every effort to support the appropriate training of teachers of speakers of nonstandard dialects by disseminating information through its established vehicles” [4: 225].

Most teachers believe students need to learn Standard English so that they will have the communication skills which will enable them more opportunities in the future, and there are numerous studies that support this position. It is from this belief that many teachers have developed a negative attitude toward minority dialects as forms of incorrect English. According to R. Wheeler and R. Swords, “it is clearly the case that when an urban teacher tells minority-language students that their language is wrong and error-filled, she creates a seriously deleterious effect in the classroom” [1: 16].

And sociolinguist Walt Wolfram explains that when a teacher uses corrective measures to teach Standard English, there is an automatic implication of wrongness in the student’s own dialect which sets those children up to feel inferior and creates a dynamic of resistance to the school experience” [5: 279]. While teachers’ intentions in teaching Standard English are often imbedded in their belief that Standard English will improve their students’ opportunity for future success, it is possible that their “corrective” attitude toward non-standard variations has actually been impeding their chances for academic progress.

In some countries there is a long tradition of sociolinguists and dialectologists attempting to make their contrastive analyses of different dialects available to schoolteachers, often motivated by the belief that a contrastive analysis of a dialect and the standard variety can help teachers distinguish genuine errors from cases of language transfer, and teach schoolchildren some of the systematic differences between the dialect and the standard. There is evidence that dialect-speaking children acquire the standard variety better and more quickly when they are taught in this way: indeed, the Ebonics controversy in the USA began precisely because schools in Oakland, California that taught systematic differences between African American Vernacular English and standard English were producing better educational results than schools that allowed only standard English in the classroom [1: 15].

Dialect education programs bring awareness to the fact that all dialects in any language are systematic and governed by a set of specific rules. At the heart of these programs lies the goal of changing “Standard American English is the correct English” ideology from the bottom-up. Most dialect awareness programs have been designed by linguists who see the key to attitude change lies in addressing the underlying misunderstanding of how language varies. Thus, for linguists, the message is simple: inform and educate the public and then the attitudes toward minority dialects will begin to change. Most programs focus on series of grammar exercises that will reveal certain patterns in a particular dialect’s phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. Once a pattern is identified, the participants compare it to Standard American English. As teachers and students complete the exercises and gain more knowledge in the history and development of the particular dialects, they will then begin to discover for themselves that other English dialects are also ‘systematic’ and ‘rule-governed.’ Linguists hope that through changing people’s attitudes, dialect awareness programs will overcome bias, stereotypes, and language discrimination.

In particular, there are two primary concerns in the awareness programs – the terminology that is used to describe the differences between dialects and the oversimplified descriptions in the dialects’ structure. The terminology many dialect

awareness programs use to describe how dialects of English differ is traditional linguistic terminology. This creates a problem in the fact that the terms have meaning and use outside of linguists. When dialect awareness programs use linguistic terms for educational purposes, the terminology is much more likely to carry with it connotations from everyday use. R. Wyer and D. Albarrachin note that “once a preexisting representation is activated and used to comprehend new information, instantiations of unmentioned features that are required in order to comprehend the information may be added spontaneously to the representation that is formed of the information” [6: 290]. Basically, the use of terminology that has a negative connotation in everyday use to introduce new dialect knowledge to a person is likely to “comprehend” the meaning of the term in a way that “spontaneously” incorporates the negative connotation in with the new knowledge.

Dialect awareness programs offer the greatest possibility for changing the negative attitudes that many Americans have toward dialect variation. These programs have already shown promise in their ability to help non-standard speaking students improve test scores and feel better about their own dialect, and teachers have also demonstrated that in participating in these programs, their knowledge of dialect difference can increase dramatically. But, the ultimate goal for dialect awareness programs is to change the negative attitudes toward dialect varieties. For this goal to be achieved, more studies need to be done to ensure that

the terminology used to describe dialect differences promotes a positive view of minority dialects. Further, more research needs to be conducted to understand the most efficient way to introduce and explain dialect knowledge to students so that it will lead to attitude changes. While we still have a long way to go in terms of language equality in the U.S., it seems that with a little adjusting, dialect awareness programs are putting us on the right path.

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