

Teacher acquisition of and reflections on urban students' dialects

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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 rarely has the teachers’ acquisition of non-prestige forms been examined in any form (a notable exception is Fogel and Ehri 2006).

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. A written translation task assesses teachers’ knowledge of non-prestige dialects (Siegel 1999, 2010) throughout the school year. Accompanying interviews at the beginning and end of the study connect teacher-to-student discourse to rapport-building strategies and ideologies about non-prestige language use in the classroom.

For the translation task, ten sentences are provided in a prestige variety of English, which subjects are asked to translate into the language of their “typical” student. Knowledge of seven features of AAE is assessed, selected for their common usage and regional relevance: copula deletion, multiple negation, consonant cluster simplification, possessive –s omission, existential “it” for “there”, habitual “be”, and third-person singular –s omission. The opportunity for providing each feature is presented four times in each administration of the task (for a total of 28 possibly opportunities). Each sentence contains between two and four opportunities for feature translation.

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 was again conducted one-on-one at the conclusion of the study in June 2011. These 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.

Through the use of the two methods, a more complex picture of teachers language strategies is presented. The teachers acquisition of students dialects is reflected in the written task, while perceived use and rapport-building strategies is examined through the interviews. 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.