

LANGUAGE AWARENESS: THE LINGUISTIC LINK NEEDED IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

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Abstract

Language awareness has been largely overlooked by the American education system. This paper provides background knowledge needed to justify language awareness in classroom teaching. As educators we need to be more informed and think more systematically about teaching linguistic diversity in our classrooms.

Keywords

language awareness, linguistic diversity, Students' Right to Their Own Language

Introduction

Language, culture, and histories are inextricably linked to our identity. Students and educators bring their identities and communities with them into our classrooms every day through the use of their language and dialect. In other words, our language tells others who we are and to which communities we belong. It is our “social and political capital” (Young, 2007; Lippi-Green, 1997). Therefore, a linguistic focus in education linked through the *Students' Right to Their Own Language* resolution and tied to Common Core State Standards (CCSS)² will work to close the gap of unequal access to language and literacy. This approach will ultimately improve students' chances to participate in school and society.

Educators devote themselves to the well-being of all children and do their part every day to provide students with access to a free education. However, the realization of the equal right to education has been hindered by lack of resources, adoption of adequate measures, and suitable policies, and the increasing linguistic diversification of American classrooms. If educators root our teaching in the *Students Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL) resolution and merge that with students' learning outcomes found in the CCSS through teaching linguistic awareness (LA), educators will

² Education is guided by standards that outline what students should know and be able to do. To reach a wider audience I reference the Common Core State Standards, which serve as the source for state standards, like the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards.

affirm students' language rights while achieving students' learning outcomes. Teachers can achieve these goals by teaching and applying language awareness application and practices in the classroom.

Although educators support the idea of equal access to education for all students, teachers rarely address the relationship of the power that is reflected in their students' language and dialect (Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003). Educators may fear exploring the topic of how some dialects hold more privilege than others, because educators understand how any prejudice can be harmful and deeply affect students. Linguistic prejudice towards students in their classroom who speak non-standardized varieties of English is especially harmful. In other words, educators may fear that students will internalize messages that society views their language as incorrect or wrong.

In addition, some educators may feel unprepared to address the multiple language identities found in their classroom or in society. Ball and Muhammad (2003) examined if and how education programs prepare educators for linguistically diverse classrooms. Their 2003 survey revealed that few colleges or universities required courses in language diversity for teacher candidates at the start of the new millennium (Ball & Muhammad, 2003). According to this research, preservice teachers entered early 21st century classrooms unaware of society's and even their own linguistic views and prejudices. At that time, most educators were trained to teach their content and pass their knowledge of the mainstream dominant language on to the students, without ever stopping to question, reflect on, or examine their own or their students' socially embedded linguist beliefs (Ball & Muhammad, 2003).

Educators review the standards when developing curriculum, and those standards point to incorporating language awareness and SRTOL. For example, a 10th grade English Language Arts standard requires students to "analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature" (Common Core). In order to achieve this goal, educators should utilize SRTOL and language awareness, starting with the history of the English language to show the connection between language and culture. Psychologist and historian Asa G. Hillard III argues that "few Americans have been taught such simple things as how English really came to be" (2002, p. 93) and affirms that if language evolution was more "widely known, chauvinistic attitudes towards language might be dismantled" (2002, p. 93). In other words, if educators teach their students to follow the evolution of a language, then they are doing work to systematically change language attitudes and ideology by teaching language through a historical, political, and cultural lens. The tenets of SRTOL complement the CCSS outcomes and give students a stronger understanding of language.

Scholarly Positions and Controversies Surrounding SRTOL

SRTOL has been embroiled in controversy and faced questions from educators and scholars since its inception. Upon SRTOL's adoption many educators and scholars felt that the document failed to clearly address how educators were to engage with language instruction and diversity in the classroom (Smith 1976; Zorn 2010). For many educators and scholars SRTOL was a social justice or historical response to the sociocultural and political climate at the time (Parks 2000). Other scholars argue that the resolution contradicts itself by stating we should be affirming students' right to their own language while not acknowledging that educational institutions value and respect academic writing and teachers have a responsibility to their institutions to successfully teach students Standard American English (Smith 1976; Zorn 2010). Scholars view the SRTOL resolution as a clear call to action to all educators on behalf of NCTE in order to support language rights for all students in the classroom, including all growing populations within our schools (Smitherman, 1995). Educators have the responsibility to foster students' linguistic agency

There are several competing theories about the role that educators and English education should assume in implementing SRTOL. The CCC Language Policy Committee Survey

respondents agreed that language diversity training was necessary for educators, but 28% of the respondents admitted they had not received any language courses in their own college training (CCCC Language Policy Committee, 2018). As educators, we can research SRTOL and search for theoretical and pedagogical practices to use in the classroom. We can examine the decades-long debates, statements, surveys, arguments, commentaries, perspectives, and implications from legal, economic, cultural, and historical perspectives.

The SRTOL resolution was drafted as a guide to foster and enhance educators' instruction and classroom practices. The statement should be viewed as the foundational framework that cultivates respect and value in our students' linguistic background that in turn directly influences, enhances, and enriches all educators' instruction in the classroom. Using SRTOL as a foundation aids educators in having the necessary conversations in the classroom that confront the misconceptions and prejudice found in society about language. These conversations create a metalinguistic knowledge for educators and students, which increases overall sensitivity and enriches experiences for everyone. Creating this sensitivity to language awareness allows other nonstandard dialects to carve out an identity and a space in mainstream classrooms (Freeman, 1975). The SRTOL approach allows mindful consideration of minority students (Canagarajah, 2006) while providing more students with points of access. This allows educators to move forward, so all students can focus on the similarities found in language rather than the differences. SRTOL allows students to approach SAE with a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset in our classroom. Educators create an environment where students examine and legitimize structures in language in our composition classroom, which help students develop written competence (Canagarajah, 2006). Educators have the ability to create a "crucial experience of safety for writing inside our classroom unless we show [students] how to be safe outside" (Elbow, 1999, p. 359) and that safety can be found through the lens of SRTOL.

SRTOL: Missed Opportunities for Educators

Since 1974, educators have been charged with exhibiting linguistic sensitivity in their teaching. This call to action was raised by the nation's two largest organizations for English teachers: The National Council of Teachers (NCTE) and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), which passes language policies for the profession. CCCC passed the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL) that ends with a directive for all educators to have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, & Jackson, 2015).

These organizational language policies from CCCC and NCTE characterize their positions toward policy and pedagogical development in support of language diversity in the classroom. However, many educators are not aware of the decades-old SRTOL resolution or are uninformed about how to fulfill its charge. In fact, at the start of the millennium, most licensed teachers had never heard of this resolution. In 2000, "The Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey" asked NCTE and CCCC members if they knew about the SRTOL or any of the positions that the two organizations had taken on language discrimination. This survey "showed that fully one-third of the membership had no knowledge of the positions the organizations had taken" (Delpit, 2002, p. xxi), proving that educators must be more informed and think more systematically about teaching linguistic diversity in our classrooms.

Teaching linguistic diversity allows educators to nurture students' language backgrounds. As educators, we cannot ignore the identities, social and cultural forces that influence our students. By supporting linguistic diversity, we are properly preparing our students for societal change instead of limiting a students' language to the playground and their home (Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003; Young, 2007). With SRTOL, educators are able to value all academic engagement with a wide range

of discourse in their classroom. SRTOL helps educators and students become agents of change within the educational system in which, if not navigated properly, students can become a “casualty of literacy” (Young, 2007, p. 122). With language and communication surrounding so many facets of life, educators who embrace the tenants of SRTOL are in a unique position to help students confront language ideologies in the safe environment of the classroom, enabling students to be successful in school and life. Rosina Lippi-Green also cautions that “language is deeply emblematic of our identities and backgrounds, and as a result the ways that educators interpret and respond to students’ language use may directly and deeply affect that young person (2011, p. 104). By teaching linguistic diversity, educators are in the position to support and contribute to students’ education and future through pedagogical content and language knowledge, giving students a meta-perspective on language.

Many scholars and educators have discussed the importance of acknowledging language, dialect, culture, identity and power. Judith Baker, a high school English teacher, suggests guiding students to “find patterns of speech, rules of grammar, vocabulary, tonal features, and emotional characteristics of language” (2002, p. 52). As students note, label, and discuss these characteristics alongside SAE they can make informed choices. Many other scholars like Geneva Smitherman, who helped author SRTOL, encourage educators to be culturally responsive in their teaching. This way of teaching demonstrates daily to students “that perceived errors appear to fit a linguistic pattern” (Hudley & Mallinson, 2011, p. 33). While the idea of protecting and respecting students’ rights has been apparent for years, the question remains for many educators how best to fulfill students’ rights to education, while also affirming their own language. Educators should link these two rights together by using a linguistic awareness approach in their classrooms.

An educators’ function is to have the ability to link as many sources of professional knowledge, skills, and experiences together as needed to effectively engage our students’ hearts and minds in our classrooms. When educators start to examine the hierarchal link beginning with their students’ fundamental rights, then linguistic awareness, and CCSS they will be able to inspire authentic learning—a learning that is more self-aware, ethical, and empathetic and inclusive. These links enable students to gain a sense of hope and genuine understanding of one another as human beings.

SRTOL and CCSS

SRTOL was written for educators to build a community of culturally and linguistically diverse learners within their classrooms. Hence educators broaden their students’ views towards language identity and style. By using a meta-linguistic approach, educators examine their own experiences and views to gain the “experience and training” that provides them with the insight to “respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language” (Perryman-Clark, et al., 2015, p. 236). The language in SRTOL is teacher-focused and the NCTE position statement on SRTOL encourages its “members, educators, and all people interested in education to become familiar with the document and be guided by its principals in developing and adopting educational policies and practices” (Resolution on Affirming). The CCSS language concentrates on student outcomes. However, combining both these guiding principles ensures a better understanding of language for everyone. First, SRTOL is needed to give both educators and teachers a metalinguistic knowledge of different varieties of language. The CCSS aligns with SRTOL by asking educators to ensure that their students can “apply knowledge of English language to understand how language functions in different context, to make effective choices for meaning and style, and to comprehend more fully when reading and listening” (Common Core). It is not enough for an educator to just design curriculum that aligns with the CCSS. Educators must link their instructional design back to SRTOL and incorporate language awareness in the classroom. Without the introduction of

awareness, the educator is effectively perpetuating the misconception that all students bring the same prior knowledge and skills to the classroom.

SRTOL and the CCSS both emphasize educators having a functionally oriented theory of language. By adopting and respecting the idea that language plays a complex role in student learning and in society, educators can provide more meaningful access points and opportunities for students to participate in their own education in the classroom and society. To achieve these goals educators should design curriculum that recognizes that language diversity and awareness is key in fulfilling all students' educational rights. In fact, to teach language awareness is fundamentally essential for educators and students if we aspire for students to have a full understanding of the English language. By affirming their rights to their own language we are giving the students so much more than just language and grammar lessons. We are giving students a comprehensive awareness that is far more valuable. We are teaching students to look for patterns, make discoveries, and advance their own ideas and perceptions about the world around them.

Conclusion

Linking language awareness curriculum through the lenses of SRTOL and CCSS gives educators and students a full fund of knowledge about language. Educators should give students more than just practical application of language. As teachers, we must offer students the background and fundamental linguistic knowledge to view language as systems and patterns. Without SRTOL or at least an awareness of linguistic diversity and the grammaticality of English variants at the heart of curriculum, educators and students may end up unknowingly perpetuating myths and stereotypes that surround language. When the history of language and culture is not taught, students do not see the connections between their own language and the language taught in the classroom. In using SRTOL to inform curriculum design, educators and students can have a deeper understanding of language, enabling them to make choices about language and understand its implications.

The hallmark of an educator is one who creates a learning environment that combines theoretical knowledge and practical experiences, while considering how they can best nurture their students' capabilities. When educators link standards, SRTOL, and language awareness, they are not only making an invaluable contribution to their students but to society itself. An educator who helps students capitalize on their varied backgrounds makes a difference not only in the classroom but also in the increasingly diverse world that we are preparing all of our students to enter.

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