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ABSTRACT
        The American educational system has failed to
recognize and respect the "native" oral communication skills of
students from backgrounds culturally different from white,
middle-class students' backgrounds. The cuturally different students
are not necessarily culturally disadvantaged. For example, black
youths' "natural" oral expression is quite adequate within most black
communities; it is only when such youths must interact with white
culture that problems arise. Community colleges are in the unique
position of being able to offer instruction in communication skills
to culturally different students in both their own culturally
determined language usage and in standard English usage. A
bidialectal approach must be used. Recognition and application of
this approach on the community college level offers promise of
reversing the current, limited trends in speech communication
education. (CH)

THE ROLE OF ORAL COMMUNICATION IN THE COMMUNITY

COLLEGE FOR THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT

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Public education in the United States is an instrument of
American society. There is little evidence to support the con-
tention by many leaders in professional education that public
education in America is reconstructionist in nature; that is,
that the public schools take the lead in effecting social
change. In reality, history indicates that all societies
where public education developed, it has served as a reflector
of the existing social order. Close scrutiny of the systems of
public education functioning in different societies today re-
veals a clear relationship between the social and political
framework upon which the society is built and the philosophic
principles upon which public education is formulated.[1]

The preceding statement is characteristic of criticism that has been

directed at the entire American educational system. It is an indictment

of what is believed by many to be a system internally inconsistent with

its stated goals and purposes. Despite education's manifest egalitarian

function in the creation of social mobility based on personal achievement,

the inherent function and structure of our traditional educational in-

stitutions from elementary through college frequently results in limited

mobility within the existing social structure.

The community college is viewed by many as an innovative, non-

traditional institution which serves to expand limited opportunities

for mobility within the social structure. Indeed, it has been argued

elsewhere that the major explanation for the rapid growth of this type

of institution is that it is responding to the same societal pressures

to open channels of social mobility that the American secondary school

responded to earlier in this century.[2] Like the high school which was

initially quite academic and selective, the model community college has

become a comprehensive institution with an open admissions policy, ex-

tensive guidance and counseling facilities, and containing a program

of developmental and technical-vocational education as well as the

original academic transfer program. The community college has therefore

become the institution of higher education which operationalizes the American "open class" ideology and provides the perception that all who enter can learn and advance themselves socially and occupationally.

The difficulty, of course, is providing substance to this perception. Welcoming and encouraging late and post-adolescents who have a history of failure in traditional schools poses a difficult and complex task for community colleges. The broad solution for this task lies in understanding the needs of such students and a commensurate commitment on the part of the institution to meet these needs.

A recent survey indicated that approximately 40 percent of public two-year colleges have developed special programs for the "culturally different."[3] Although varying in their extensiveness and nature, all institutions having such programs stressed reading skills, 90 percent stressed writing skills, and almost 80 percent stressed speaking skills.

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate the importance of the oral communication portion of remedial programs designed for the culturally different and to discuss some of the more salient problems and issues in this endeavor.

The National Council of Teachers of English Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged maintain that "only as progress is made in the use of oral language will there be substantial improvement in reading and writing."[4] Social psychologists would support this argument by pointing to the relationship of social (verbal) interaction and the development of self-concept. When the nature of the interaction is such that strong self-concepts are developed, the individual generally

has enough emotional security to enter into situations where he must learn different behavioral patterns.[5]

It is because of the above reasoning that many educators use the term "culturally different" instead of "culturally disadvantaged" when referring to minority group students who come from the lower socio-economic class with a history of failure in schools. In other words, the label "culturally disadvantaged" implies tha people so classified are inferior. If people are classified as inferior, they will generally be treated as inferior, a treatment which can quite adversly affect psychological and social development. On the other hand, the neutral term "culturally different" implies that one's own "culture" and self are per se legitimate and worthy elements in the social world. If one wants to be successful in another social world, then one must learn the attitudes and behaviors of that other world but without denying one's own social self and world.

The conceptual difference in the terms "culturally disadvantaged" and "culturally different" are operationalized in remedial programs of oral communication over the question of non-standard (i.e., black) English. Educators who desire to assist the "disadvantaged" in achieving upward mobility within the school and society tend to regard non-standard English as a barrier which must be stamped out as quickly as possible in order to achieve the objective. The latent consequence of this perspective of non-standard English has been well summarized by Leiblich as follows:

> When the white educator under the guise of social progress, devaluates black culture, black language, and black speech he is in reality devaluating the black man as a person. When the black student accepts the white teacher's verdict as to

what he is and attempts to shed his blackness through speech
change, etc., he alienates himself from his own person and
from his heritage denigrating himself to the status of a
'sick white man.'[6]

The concept of "culturally different" entails that non-standard

English possess equal integrity as a linguistic system to that of

standard English and therefore should not be viewed as "disadvantaged"

or defective.[7]

The primary contributors to this viewpoint are socio-linguists. The

overall concept of a dialectual socio-linguistic system is well illustrated

in the work of Bernstein who develops the idea that different segments of

the social structure may generate different speech systems or linguistic

codes.[8] "Linguistics" represents the predictable organizational patterns

of the total language system an individual may use in responding to

his social environment, but what governs behavior and forms functional

reality or actual "speech" is the particular social strata of which he

is a member. Thus, the social structure becomes the psychological

reality for the individual through the speech patterns learned in that

structure. The linguistic form used by the mainstream of a society is

considered standard (i.e., standard English). Those variations in lan-

guage use from the standard form in a social strata which display predictable

patterns of structure and function rather than randomness are called

dialects (i.e., non-standard black English). Therefore, the term "dis-

advantaged" in referring to a deficient use of language is inappropriate

when applied to a predictable and functionally sound linguistic dialectual

variation such as non-standard black English. Hence, remediation where

no deficit exists may also be inappropriate.

As linguist Walt Wolfram points out:

> In terms of sociolinguistic situations, it is quite
> common for a socially dominant culture to view a socially
> subordinate one as having an inadequate means of communi-
> cation. This view is a common manifestation of linguistic
> ethnocentrism of the dominant classes. Thus, Spanish-
> speaking South Americans often consider the Indian peasants
> to have no valid language system--verbally destitute. The
> current treatment of non-standard English varieties is no
> different, although it may be more subtle because Americans
> have sometimes denied the sociological facts concerning the
> subordinate role of some segments of the population in American
> society.[9]

In addition to the socio-linguistic argument for the legitimacy of

non-standard English, Taylor has argued that attempts to eradicate non-

standard English are internally inconsistent with democratic ideals in

that these "programs and attitudes deny cultural pluralism in favor of

a 'you people are (or should be) just like us' philosophy."[10]

What are the implications of our discussion thus far? It would

seem that community colleges should develop courses i. on-standard

English for credit. This would legitimize non-standard English and the

cultural background of many youths in remedial programs, thereby

facilitating the development of strong self-concepts of youth in the

academic world. Too, through studying one's own dialect, concepts of

language structure and function are more apparent, and should assist

in facilitating the learning of standard English. When approached in

this fashion (commonly called "bidialectualism"), standard English is

considered and taught in much the same way as a second language for

foreign students. Specifically, in this approach both "dialects" are

used in a comparison and contrast technique where each is considered

equally legitimate although one may be more appropriate given a particular

social context than the other.[11]

We would be remiss, however, if we did not note some of the problems

and complexities of operationalizing this perspective in a program of

developmental education. An immediate problem concerns the availability

of instructors capable of teaching non-standard English in a bidialectual

approach. For example, Hopf in a study of programs of instruction used

to teach oral communication to the disadvantaged in selected urban

community colleges, found that although all instructors had a master's

degree, none had been trained for working with such students. In

addition, Hopf found that there seemed to be little comprehension of the

problems of those students.[12]

A related problem concerns the development of our state of knowledge

in this general area. For example, little is known about the relation-

ship of the effect of physical and social maturation of the late and post-

adolescent on learning. If we were to take a two-year old child from

a Phillippino stone-age society and place that child in the home of

a middle-class professional in this society, it is quite likely that

that child would also become a professional. If, however, we took

that child's fifteen-year-old brother and placed him in that same home,

it is unlikely that he would be able to become a professional irrespective

of the kinds of interactional experiences he has within that home or

within schools in this society.

If these assumptions are correct, they indicate a relationship

between physical and social maturation and the ability to learn. But

this relationship is obviously influenced by culture. If we placed a

fifteen-year-old son of a middle-class family in this society and a

fifteen-year-old son of a Phillippino stone-age family in a German

school, it is most likely that the son of the middle-class American family would be more successful in this school because of the similarities of German and American middle-class culture. Similarly, it is well known that Spanish-speaking children of middle-class Latin American families who move to the United States are much more successful in Anglo schools than are children from Chicano families living in American <u>barrios</u>. The implication here is that learning in different cultural contexts is somewhat dependent upon the similarities of the cultures (i.e., the attitudinal and motivational norms of the cultures) involved. The relevant questions for us in this essay may be posed as follows: (1) what are the specific differences and similarities between the language systems of the ghetto and of the larger society? (2) what are the specific differences and similarities of the attitudinal and motivational norms of the ghetto and the larger society? (3) how do these two kinds of differences and similarities interact and (4) what is the resultant impact on the student from the ghetto in the community college? These are questions upon which much more research and thinking must be done.

If the community college is to adequately serve one of its major functions in contemporary American society, i.e., that of expanding the quality of educational opportunity to all citizens within the society, then much more attention must be given to developing not only programs of compensatory education but courses in non-standard English as a language system used in a bidialectual approach for culturally different youths. If scholars are to assist the community college in this endeavor, they

must continue to pursue the question of the impact of social context on learning and develop the implications of the fruits of this endeavor for community colleges.

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