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ABSTRACT

Rather than dismiss teaching English usage or embrace it without question, elementary teachers need to make usage instruction meaningful and motivating and present it in a nonthreatening yet systematic manner. The teacher must become familiar with his/her particular language community by listening to students and noting the forms they are using. The instructional goal later will be to teach toward a "limited" number of items exhibited by most of the class, those not attributable to the normal process of language acquisition (maturity) or to interference (in the case of bilingual students). Instruction should be concerned with those word choices which distinguish standard English from nonstandard dialects. Usage choices should be appropriate to the speaker/writer's purposes and appropriate to the context. Classroom games can be used to teach usage forms in a positive way in elementary and middle schools so that students can develop better communication skills. Eight games that can be used to teach usage forms in a positive, nonthreatening way in elementary and middle schools are described. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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Introduction

Issues in education seem to travel through the years in a circular fashion, as banners snatched up and zealously waved by dedicated teachers, tossed aside in favor of some new innovation for a span of years, then dusted off and raised more enthusiastically than before. Teaching English usage is such an issue; rather than dismiss it or embrace it without question, elementary teachers need to make usage instruction meaningful and motivating and present it in a non-threatening, yet systematic matter. A false dichotomy, in the context of this article, means that teachers do not have to choose one side of the issue or the other; both can be served.

Usage instruction is concerned with proper form. The agreement of verb and subject in number and tense, the form of the pronoun in various positions in the sentence and the word order in sentences are some of the situations that present learning problems of proper form. The child who says "I done my work" is using the wrong verb form. Another who says, "Him and me are friends" is using the wrong form of the pronoun. DeHaven suggests, "As usage is taught at the elementary level, the teacher should focus on the children's forms that are most noticeably different from common usage (1979, p. 79). In other words, usage instruction should begin with the most common errors made by students, just as mini-lessons stem from real reading and writing needs. So, the teacher must become familiar with his or her particular language community by listening to students and noting the forms the students are using.

The instructional goal later will be to teach toward a *limited* number of items exhibited by most of the class, those not attributable to the normal process of language acquisition (maturity) or to interference (in the case of bilingual students). Instruction need not be concerned with controversial, minute matters of correctness (such as rules governing the use of who/whom; can/may; between/among, etc.) or basic communication problems due to ungrammatical constructions (such as those exhibited by students still learning English as a second language), but with those word choices which distinguish standard English from nonstandard dialects. The two largest nonstandard dialect groups in urban schools today are students who speak Black English Vernacular (BEV) and those with a Spanish-speaking background, removed from that heritage to varying degrees. Educators are faced with not only the task of modeling a dialect possibly unfamiliar to some children while maintaining open communication and rapport, but also the challenge

of heightening their awareness of variant forms and social contexts and their powers of discrimination while keeping intact their enthusiasm for oral and written expression and self-esteem--a formidable task! But it is possible to do both.

Rationale for Usage Instruction

Many teachers are indoctrinated with the attitude of uncritical acceptance of anything their students say or write. The idea, in many ways, is a sound one: emphasize communication in the classroom; do not stifle it by imposing a never-ending barrage of rules and restrictions, and certainly never correct the student speaker. Perhaps many teachers are guilty of over generalizing this policy to mean all rules, all manner of corrections for speakers of any variant English dialects as well as foreign languages. Students' consistently poor usage scores on standardized tests and poor word choices evidenced in their oral and written compositions cause one to reflect on that possibility.. However, is it reasonable to rely solely on a single teacher as the only standard English model a child hears and expect that child to distinguish standard from nonstandard usage on a test? When parents speak the same dialect the children do and when television, radio, and movie personalities lean more and more toward nonstandard "realistic" dialects, the teacher as a model is heavily outnumbered. Furthermore, do children have the ability to independently compare their own language with another, pinpoint the differences and make judgments based on correlation's of context and usage? Even if this were possible, is passive contact with standard English (teacher model) enough? In short, if teachers do not specifically teach standard usage, how can children be expected to be familiar with it? And finally, is such a familiarity important for reasons more realistic than test scores? In order to address these concerns, the subject of usage instruction will be approached via three basic questions: Why should usage be taught? When should usage be taught? How should usage be taught?

Why should usage be taught?

> "Education is politics. American education is American politics. Every educational act is a political act, reflecting and serving political values. Teachers of "standard" languages are inextricably enmeshed in social and political values and conflicts." (Harwood, 1980, p. 31).

Some linguists have pounced upon usage instruction as an issue of racial class prejudice and ethnocentric pedantry. Discussing teaching of "Middle-classian," James Sledd warns of ". . big brother, telling us that we should make our students speak and write alike since a standardized language is a necessity for an industrialized society,"

and maintains that we are" reinforcing the blind prejudices of the community at large" (1968, p. 127). In fact, in 1972, a committee of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution stating:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and variations of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identify and style. . .The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (Pooley 1974, p. xii.)

This resolution could certainly be interpreted as advocating no usage instruction whatsoever, so that each child's language would be preserved intact, hand in hand with his fragile identity.

Many who oppose teaching English usage conjure up a nightmare-like classroom in which students are slapped with criticism at each attempt to speak, their self-respond trod upon mercilessly as their home dialect is condemned, the substance of their message falling upon the unreceptive ears of a bigoted teacher.

> Here is the trap waiting for every teacher of English at every level: Our aim is to help the student use "good English." but our attempts at "correction" in effect shut him up. Constant interruption makes it impossible for people to attend to what they are saying. Constant unpredictable criticism makes people insecure. Constant negative criticism of their natural language patterns makes students hate English. Our means defeat our ends: We want students to appreciate the power and beauty of language, but we are trapped into teaching "how not to write, what not to say" (Guth, 1973, p. 90).

Like Guth, Courtney B. Cazden also laments the damage done by focusing on usage in the classroom:

> ". . .teachers, over the decades if not centuries, have somehow gotten into the habit of hearing with different ears once they go through the classroom doors. Language forms assume an opaque quality. We cannot hear through them; we hear only errors to be corrected" (1976, p. 80).

There are others, however, who believe that teaching usage is not vile or base.

Reasons for Teaching Usage in Schools

Every one of these positions against usage teaching is well-taken and valid. A language without variation would be colorless. Our society ought not to judge a speaker by his dialect. Students and what they have to say should be accepted, treated with respect, and responded to, regardless of their choice of verb tenses or plurals. William Labov's research has proven indisputably that nonstandard dialects are not substandard, but logical, compete, rule-governed, totally useful variations of a rich language (1970). However, the arguments against teaching standard English usage are based on three important fallacies.

The first fallacy is that usage instruction means constant interruption and correction. This assumption fails to give teachers credit for sensitivity and creativity. If usage items are directly and systematically taught and guided practice on a single item is frequent and motivating, then correction will be incidental. There are ways to teach usage forms without seeming to and certainly without interrupting. In addition, if the whole issue of standard usage has been explained well to students from the beginning, they will understand that they are merely being asked to conform to certain word choices in certain social contexts, not to forsake their language ties with home, peers and community. Rosalind Minor Ashley contends, "The student's way of saying it may be the correct way for him on the ballfield. We can call his usage incorrect in our classroom, but it would be incorrect to ever call it wrong" (1970, p. 89). Most authorities agree on handling spoken errors by first responding to the content of the child's message, then reusing the word correctly in an expanded context and giving the child a new opportunity to use the word correctly. An example might be a student who announces, "I brung my homework!" The teacher could reply., "Great, I'm glad you remembered! I see you also brought your lunch today. What did you bring to eat?" In this situation, the teacher serves to acknowledge and reinforce the act of communicating and to supply a model which may or may not be picked up by the students. Under some circumstances the process may be carried further, and this will be discussed later.

A second fallacy is that the only purpose of usage instruction is to "standardize" the population, so that we all neatly conform to the noble, literary usages of our forefathers, and no "corruption" is allowed to occur. Language changes constantly. People living in the United States in the twentieth century do not speak the English of Chaucer or of Shakespeare. They don't speak the English of Woodrow Wilson. Silly once meant holy, and the pronoun, you, could once be used with a singular verb form, as in "Was you ever in Baltimore?"

Today we say "were you." Since language changes this much, no one can say how a word "ought" to be used. The best that anyone can do is to say how it is being used.

There are good reasons for teaching English usage, aside from the hopeless one of saving the language from change, and the questionable one of improving test scores. These studies have to do with job employment and language use. Several studies have been conducted which have shown a correlation between nonstandard English usage and discriminatory employment practices. Some dialects were found to "elicit stereotyped, negative impressions" in job-entry screening and interview situations. Of particular interest was research done by Robert Hopper in 1977 in Austin, Texas, in which 105 employment interviewers were asked to rate potential employees on the basis of a taped interview and a simulated data sheet of qualifications for the position. In each case, they rated the probability that the applicant would be hired for the positions for which he qualified. Hopper found that attitudes toward language do influence hiring decisions. Speakers of nonstandard dialects did poorly not only in top sales and supervision categories, but also in interviews for technical positions (McClain 1979, p. 3). So to totally avoid teaching standard English may be limiting students' future employment possibilities. For example, the person who says, "I don't got a pin" for "I don't have a pen." may not be positively received as a salesman, nurse or lawyer, if such usage is considered inappropriate by a prospective employer. The role of the teacher is to help to better the lives of students and requires that the teacher be accountable for improving language skills when necessary.

The third fallacy upon which opponents of usage instruction base their arguments is that by teaching the standard dialect we are attempting to obliterate the nonstandard dialect students bring to school. Usage instruction is an effort to open doors for students by supplying them with an alternative to their dialect which will be useful and appropriate in certain situations; it is not an effort to "stamp out" their word choices. Such an attempt would be futile anyway. Educators have the obligation to provide children with the tools necessary to expand their range of opportunity as adults.

> "One misconception is that nonstandard English (NSE) speakers have, in fact, internalized standard English(SE) but choose to use NSE; they are simply careless in their choice of words. Persons who make such contentions do not comprehend the nature of NSE, are not bidialectal, and therefore have no choice as to which dialect (SE or NSE) they speak." (McClain 1979, pp. 6-7).

So what is "good English" and what is a teacher to do? A suggestion by Pooley (1979) who said that good English is marked by success in making language choices so that the fewest number of persons will be distracted by the choices seems to provide an answer. This means that usage choices should be appropriate to the speaker's/writer's purposes and appropriate to the context. Purposes in using language range from the highly formal to the extremely informal. Joos (1979) calls these settings: intimate, casual, consultative and formal. A wife asking her husband for extra spending money (intimate), an adult son asking his parents (casual) for extra cash, an employee asking her employer for a raise (consultative) or a professor requesting grant money from a foundation (formal) all demonstrate that using the same style of language would be inappropriate and ineffective. Confusing the purposes and contexts of language result in either hurt feelings, astonished surprise or disappointment. It isn't difficult to imagine the shocked faces on a board of directors if a request for a substantial raise was made in "baby-talk" by their up-and-coming CEO.

Good communicators are sensitive not only to their purposes of communicating and the contexts in which they find themselves, but also to how their conversational partners are responding to what is being said and how it is being delivered. When people are comfortable with language choices, effective communication is more likely to occur. Conversely, if language use makes people uncomfortable--for whatever reason--distraction and, therefore, miscommunication can be predicted. If participants are distracted by the features of how an idea is being offered, they will pay less attention to what the idea is. Finally, if participants are distracted by how language is used, they will discredit the speaker/writer as either unreliable, pretentious, intellectually deficient, or just plain stupid. These judgments may not be accurate, but they probably will be made, nevertheless. This is the positions take by Baugh(1987) and Kuschner (1989) among others. Block(1997) has stated that "because standard English is the language of business, government, the press and other aspects of national activities, schools are expected to teach it. In doing so, of course, students must not be taught or infer that their own dialect is deficient or inferior, but shown how their individual patterns differ in vocabulary and syntax choices as well as phonology" (p. 12). Block should be hailed as one of very few authors of language arts textbooks who even dare broach the subject of teaching standard English because of its controversial nature.

Suggestions for the classroom.

So what can be done to teach usage forms in a positive, non threatening way in elementary and middle schools? One way to do this is through games such as those that follow:

a. Yesterday, Tomorrow, Now. For an oral game, write these words on the chalkboard: Yesterday, Tomorrow, Now. Then let the children respond according to pattern. For example:

Teacher: Yesterday, George caught a shark.
1st child: Tomorrow, George will catch a shark.
2nd child: Now, George catches a shark.

Then repeat the pattern with a different sentence, or repeat the same sentence with a different verb.

b. Never again list. A "never-again" list can be constructed. On that list students put all the kinds of mistakes in usage that they find themselves making (e.g. brung, ain't). Then once in a while they look through the list and see which mistakes they no longer make and which ones must still be watched. They also check through the list when they are revising papers that they want to hand in or when writing for publication. This list could be made up and posted for the class as a whole instead of for individuals.

c. Naturalization court. Set up an English language court in your classroom. Let that court hear the cases of expressions like "we was," "they wasn't" or "he don't." The court can decide whether such expressions should be accepted as regular members of the English language in a classroom setting. One or more of the class can plead the case for the expression and another one can argue against it. A judge and a jury can be appointed.

d. Being "It." Students put their heads down except "it." "It" touches a child and says, " What are you?" " I am a dog, or horse or snake, etc." "It" says, "If you were a dog, what would you do ?" The other child answers, "If I were a dog, I would bark ,etc."

e. I am thinking of...This is a game to counteract use of ain't.

1st child: I am thinking of something in this room.
2nd child: Is it_____?
1st child: No, it is not_____. etc.

d. Student as teacher. Have one student a week be teacher. Have him prepare a usage lesson that lasts for 5-15 minutes. The teacher can collaborate on what usage item for him to do. All that week, the student can watch to see that wasn't or weren't, for example, are used correctly by his classmates.

e. Shifting gears. Ask the students if they have a relatively new article of clothing--a shirt, or a blouse, a pair of jeans--they don't like and hardly ever wear. If they don't have such an article, tell them to

pretend that they have one and are wearing it on a day when they meet several people who ask them if they are wearing a new blouse, shirt, or whatever. The students are then to give an answer back to the following people:

a. your best friend
b. your pastor, priest or rabbi
c.. your favorite teacher
d. your father's best friend
e.. your favorite aunt or uncle
f. your neighbor
g. the school principal
h. someone "hot" you want to impress

Make sure the students understand that their responses vary according to the intimacy and/or formality of the setting and their familiarity with the audience., This is a way to introduce the idea that word choices (usage) are not necessarily correct or incorrect, but appropriate or inappropriate according to the register or setting in which they find themselves. (Salies, 1995)

f. How many ways to say _____? The teacher can explain that there are several ways we can apologize for something we've done, depending upon the circumstances. Have the students create an apology for each situation listed below. Then have the students discuss how situations affect the language choices we make.

You arrive at school thirty minutes late (because the bus was late) and you must report to the principal's office before you may go to class.

You are thirty minutes late for a date.

You are thirty minutes late for a study session with friend.

You are thirty minutes late for work the second time in a week.

You are thirty minutes late meeting your mom at the store.

You are thirty minutes late for practice.

Conclusion

Usage instruction must be approached with sensitivity in a classroom. It is not to be studied because we want anyone to feel guilty about racist or sexist language in society. Nor is it to be examined so that non-white minorities gain a small measure of smug victory and relief in our classroom. It is to be studied as Engel reminds us, because we have it in our power either to degrade or to enhance and beautify ourselves and our world by the way to we use language (Engel, 1984). If professional language teachers do not empower students to use language in these ways, who will?

Elementary teachers of students speaking nonstandard dialects have a responsibility to teach usage in the classroom, so that students will have greater options for their future. Like it or not, the fact is that people are judged by the way they speak. No matter what stand is taken in teaching usage or grammar all agree that our goal as teachers is a common one: to teach our students better communication skills (Christenbury, 1996).

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