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**Standard English teaching should begin as early as possible.**

# Acceptance, awareness, approach: Three key issues to standard dialect teaching

by **Alsylvia Smith**

During the past decade much attention has been devoted to the educational problems of speakers of non-standard English. Although many ethnic groups fall into this category the primary focus has been on Black children, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There seems to be a general consensus among linguists, most sociolinguists and a few educators, that the difficulties involved in teaching these children to read, write and speak standard English arise because they are linguistically different. In spite of the proliferation of literature on the subject and the numerous recommendations made by researchers and educators, the problem remains unresolved.

Prior to the development and successful implementation of an effective program for teaching the linguistically different child, three major factors, acceptance, awareness and approach, must be carefully considered.

## **Acceptance**

The child and his dialect must be accepted by the teacher. Neither must be looked upon as being inferior. The child is not "subhuman" and his language is not sub-standard. Rejection of one's language is rejection of the person, his culture, his family and his life style. As Philip Dale points out "Black English as an autonomous dialect

has been delayed by strongly negative attitudes toward it and its speakers." It is my contention that this negative connotation of nonstandard English has been one of the predominant barriers to providing effective education for children who speak nonstandard dialects. Donoghue asserts that "the attitude of the teacher is crucial."<sup>2</sup> Before linguistically different children can be successfully taught to read and write standard English, the fact that they are "different" and not deficient" must be realized and accepted.

Philip Dale describes dialects as variations in language and Black English as a specific dialect of English.<sup>3</sup> Researchers such as, DeStefano, Fasold, Wolfram, Labov, Baratz and Shuy agree that everyone speaks a dialect. "Dialect differences are often interpreted as indicators of real or imagined differences in education, religion, morality, social class, race attitudes and other aspects of life."<sup>4</sup> The manner in which the non-standard English speaking child is perceived depends entirely upon the theory, if any, accepted by the teacher. Negative attitudes rarely, if ever, produce positive results. This is especially true in the educational arena.

## **Awareness**

According to Labov, "American education has always been concerned with nonstandard English but primarily in a negative way. It has been the object to be overcome rather than something to be studied and understood in its own right."<sup>5</sup> Because nonstandard English has been viewed in a negative manner by components of American education many educators are totally unfamiliar with its structure as a language. Once nonstandard English has been accepted as a language in its own right that is "different" and not "deficient" one is more readily able to become aware of the structural differences which exists between standard and nonstandard English. An awareness of these differences can eliminate many of the problems involved in teaching standard English to speakers of nonstandard English. Baratz states that "a structural knowledge of nonstandard vernacular and the way it can interfere with learning to speak and read standard English are indispensable to teach ghetto Negro children."

Researchers are divided into two groups: those who support the "deficit" theory and those who support the "difference" theory. These two groups, according to Baratz, have operated quite independently for several years—psycholinguists continuing to describe deficiencies while sociolinguists continued detailing differences. "Recently however with the advent of interdisciplinary programs, each group has developed an increased awareness of the other's position." I see this type of awareness as a major step in the right direction. In addition, however it is imperative that educators, researchers and the like, become more aware of and sincerely interested in the structural make-up of the language spoken by the linguistically different child.

## **Approach**

Since theories are often the foundation for methodology (approach), educators must formulate accurate theories based on empirical and unbiased research. Although there are varying viewpoints involved in providing adequate educational facilities for speakers of nonstandard English most educators agree that it should be taught. Baratz, Donoghue, Labov, Shuy, Spolsky,

Destefano and others feel that standard English should be taught as early as possible. Kenneth Johnson favors teaching standard English as a separate subject rather than incorporating it within the language arts curriculum. The most popular approach recommended by Donoghue, Baratz, Boyd, Shuy, and others is that of teaching Standard English by way of the nonstandard dialect.

Baratz proposes that speakers of nonstandard English be taught standard English as a quasi-foreign language. This approach involves the use of both standard English and nonstandard English. This bidialectal approach begins reading instruction in the student's own dialect with standard English being introduced gradually. The other language skills: listening, speaking and writing are developed by way of the student's dialect.

Of the numerous programs proposed by educators and reseachers, I am inclined to support a quasi-foreign language approach to teaching standard English. As a foreign language teacher I realize the effectiveness of logical development of the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) when teaching students a language that is different from their own. Whether standard English is taught as a separate subject or incorporated within the language arts curriculum is not as crucial as when it is taught and the approach used.

I strongly recommend that standard English teaching begin as early as possible and that all materials used, including pattern drills, etc., be in standard English. When using quasi-foreign language techniques the oral language is stressed before the written language. The language (nonstandard English) spoken by the student is accepted as being different from the one to be learned

(standard English). The teacher must be aware of the structural differences in the languages involved.

Although this method adequately deals with the issues of acceptance and awareness finding a viable method for teaching standard English to nonstandard speakers of English is indeed a difficult task. However, acceptance, awareness and approach are three key issues to which future language programs must address themselves if each child is to be educated to his fullest potential.

#### Footnotes

1. Philip Dale, **Language Development: Structure and Function** (Illinois: The Dryden Press Inc., 1972), p. 238.
2. Mildred Donoghue, **The Child and the English Language Arts** (Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1975), p. 45.
3. William Labov, **The Study of Nonstandard English** (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969), p. 1.
4. Joan C. Baratz, "Teaching Reading In An Urban Negro School System," in F. Williams, ed., **Language and Poverty Perspectives on a Theme** (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), p. 17.
5. Joan C. Baratz, "Educational Considerations for Teaching Standard English to Negro Children, in B. Spolsky, ed., **The Language Education of Minority Children** (Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 140.