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Barring teachers with 'accents' from teaching English is misguided

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Amy Fountain, Thomas Bever and Michael Hammond Special To The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, July 13, 2010 12:00 am | Comments

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The Arizona Department of Education plans to bar teachers with "heavily accented or ungrammatical" speech from classrooms with English-learning children. The ostensible goal is to ensure that children will be exposed to examples of "perfect (unaccented) English."

Yet, decades of scientific investigation in linguistics shows that exposure to only unaccented English will harm those students, not help them. As scientists, as educators, as citizens, and as state employees, we believe it is our duty to provide relevant scientific facts so state leaders and citizens can make informed decisions.

Scientific research tells us that "heavily accented speech" is not necessarily hard to understand. Tracey Derwing of the University of Alberta and Murray Monro of Simon Fraser University report that "one of the most robust findings that has emerged from every study we have done on intelligibility ... [is] it is possible to be completely intelligible and yet be perceived as having a heavy accent."

Current hiring standards for English fluency ensure that teachers' accents are not unintelligible.

The English spoken by people with "heavy" foreign accents may be as good as native speakers'. Eric Lenneberg of Cornell University and others showed that if you acquire a second language before age 13, you may master the language like a native speaker. But if you begin after age 6, you will probably have a "foreign accent." Nevertheless, your mastery of the grammar of your second language can be indistinguishable from native speakers'.

Teachers with accents improve English-as-a-second-language students' acquisition of English. Peter Richstmeier, LouAnn Gerken and Diane Ohala, in research conducted at the University of Arizona, have found that infants learn words faster when there is variation in the sounds of the words they hear.

Ethan Cox of D'Youville College showed in his UA dissertation that hearing same-language accented speech improves the speed and accuracy of adults' learning. Teachers with accents are more effective conveyors of English than those without - especially for students who come from similar language backgrounds.

Our judgments of other people's "accents" can be totally wrong. Donald Rubin of the University of Georgia conducted a study in which participants listened to audio recordings of brief lectures by a native English speaker. While listening, half of the participants saw a picture of a woman who appeared to be Asian. The other half saw a picture of a Caucasian woman.

Most listeners who saw the "Asian" woman incorrectly reported that the lecturer had a "foreign accent," and that this made it hard for them to understand. But students who had previously taken several courses from foreign instructors were not misled by the picture. It is beneficial to have more teachers with foreign accents in Arizona's classrooms - not fewer.

Biases against imagined or real "accents" are harmful. John Baugh, of Stanford University and Washington University in St. Louis, finds that many Americans engage in discriminatory "linguistic profiling" when making decisions about hiring, selecting tenants, et cetera. Accents associated with African-American and Hispanic citizens are particular targets of these practices. The Arizona policy continues these potentially unconstitutional harms.

Finally, there is no such thing as "unaccented" speech. When we say that people have an "accent," what we are saying is that they sound "different" from some standard, or from ourselves. Since all languages include distinctive sound patterns that reflect particular speaker populations, we all "have an accent." An American from Minnesota ("you betcha") sounds different from a Mississippian ("y'all") or a Vermonter ("ay-uh!").

If you're from Tucson, then, in these states - and in most of the U.S. - you are the one with the accent. A policy aimed at removing "accented" speech from our classrooms is paradoxical - unless we want them to be completely silent.

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Posted in Opinion, Amy-fountain, -thomas-bever--and-michael-hammond on *Tuesday, July 13, 2010 12:00 am*

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