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Teachers' English Fluency Initiative in Arizona

The undersigned faculty of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona endorse the following statement.

The Wall Street Journal reported on April 30, 2010 that “the Arizona Department of Education recently began telling school districts that teachers whose spoken English it deems to be heavily accented or ungrammatical must be removed from classes for students still learning English.” It is our position, based on decades of scientific investigation into the nature of language, and of language acquisition and learning, that such a policy undermines the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of English by non-native speakers and may lead to additional harmful socioeconomic effects. Our position is based on these facts (see the following pages for a brief discussion of each, including references).

- 1) ‘Heavily accented’ speech is not the same as ‘unintelligible’ or ‘ungrammatical’ speech.
- 2) Speakers with strong foreign accents may nevertheless have mastered grammar and idioms of English as well as native speakers.
- 3) Teachers whose first language is Spanish may be able to teach English to Spanish-speaking students better than teachers who don't speak Spanish.
- 4) Exposure to many different speech styles, dialects and accents helps (and does not harm) the acquisition of a language.
- 5) It is helpful for all students (English language learners as well as native speakers) to be exposed to foreign-accented speech as a part of their education.
- 6) There are many different ‘accents’ within English that can affect intelligibility, but the policy targets foreign accents and not dialects of English.
- 7) Communicating to students that foreign accented speech is ‘bad’ or ‘harmful’ is counterproductive to learning, and affirms pre-existing patterns of linguistic bias and harmful ‘linguistic profiling’.
- 8) There is no such thing as ‘unaccented’ speech, and so policies aimed at eliminating accented speech from the classroom are paradoxical.

Discussion

1) 'Heavily accented' speech is not the same as 'unintelligible' or 'ungrammatical' speech.

"This is one of the most robust findings that has emerged from every study we have done on intelligibility: intelligibility and accentedness are partially independent. In other words, it is possible to be completely intelligible and yet be perceived as having a heavy accent" (Derwing and Munro 2009: 479).

Proficiency in the language of instruction, whether classes be targeted for English language learners or native speakers, is obviously essential for a teacher. Clearly, no teacher should have an 'accent' so marked that his or her students cannot understand him or her, but existing hiring and training practices are sufficient to mitigate this.

2) Speakers with strong foreign accents may nevertheless have mastered grammar and idioms of English as well as native speakers.

The science of language acquisition shows that if you begin acquiring a language before age 13, you will master grammar and idioms like a native speaker (Lenneberg, 1967 and the large literature that follows). However, if you begin acquiring a language after the age of 6, you will probably never completely lose some trace of an accent. The older you are when you begin acquiring a second language – even between the ages of 6 and 13 – the greater the 'foreign accent' you are likely to retain. Having a (heavy) foreign accent does not mean you do not know English as well as a monolingual speaker (Piske et al., 2001 and references therein).

3) Teachers whose first language is Spanish may be able to teach English to Spanish-speaking students better than teachers who don't speak Spanish.

Foreign born speakers who learned English after age 13 may nevertheless attain fluency – even if their understanding of their second language is slightly different from that of speakers who began acquiring the language before that age (Piske et al., 2001). In addition, these speakers' near-adult experience of learning English as a second language gives them personal exposure to the particular features of English that are hard and/or easy for second language learners, especially second language learners from their language background. In particular, teachers originally from Mexico have a deep knowledge of what is hard for their Mexican-American students to learn about English.

4) Exposure to many different speech styles, dialects and accents helps (and does not harm) the acquisition of a language.

Evidence from studies of language acquisition shows that increased variability in the pronunciation of words that children hear appears to facilitate – and not slow – acquisition of linguistic patterns by very young children (Singh 2008, Richtsmeier et al., 2009). This has also been shown to help adults learning the sounds of a second language (Kingston 2003). If variability of input facilitates language acquisition for a child's first language, and for adults learning a second language, it almost certainly facilitates children's learning of a second language.

5) It is helpful for all students (English language learners as well as native speakers) to be exposed to foreign-accented speech as a part of their education.

All of us will be exposed to speakers with foreign accents, and it is useful for all speakers of English (whether we speak English natively, or as a second language) to be proficient in communicating with others who have foreign accents. Listeners benefit from practice listening to foreign-accented speech in terms of comprehension and attitudes towards speakers (Rubin 1992).

It may, in fact, be particularly useful for Spanish-speaking students learning English to have a teacher with an accent similar to their own. A recent UA dissertation (Cox 2005) addressed the impact of accented speech on second-language listening, such as in an ESL environment. The research showed that comprehension of same-language accented speech could be both faster and more accurate. In addition, subsequent published research (Leikin et al., 2009) has reinforced this conclusion. Banning accented speech in the ESL classroom will have no positive impact on learning and, in some instances, may harm instructional effectiveness.

6) There are many different 'accents' within English that can affect intelligibility, but the policy targets foreign accents and not dialects of English.

American English, like all naturally occurring human languages, encompasses a variety of different 'accents' and dialectal variants (see the very important work of William Labov and his students over the past 50 years).

Not all of these 'native' accents are equally easy for different speakers to understand. There are native born 'accents' that are harder for Arizonan English speakers to understand than many foreign 'accents'. For example, native speakers

of English from the deep south may still have marked 'accents' that speakers from the American Southwest cannot easily understand.

Similarly, foreign-born speakers from English-speaking countries have strong non-American 'accents', e.g., those who grew up in Australia, Scotland, India or even England. Most speakers of American English rate British varieties as 'more grammatical' than many American English varieties, however. Our attitudes about 'accents' are more related to our attitudes towards speaker populations than to any reliable measure of 'grammaticality' (cf Baugh 2003, Wright 1996 and others).

Other, non-linguistic, factors could affect speakers' pronunciation of English and ultimately their intelligibility (e.g., speech impediments, stuttering) – however 'accents' are being differentially targeted in the policy.

7) Communicating to students that foreign accented speech is 'bad' or 'harmful' is counterproductive to learning, and affirms pre-existing patterns of linguistic bias and harmful 'linguistic profiling'.

Evidence exists that listeners' perceptions of 'foreign accented speech' are often inaccurate – listeners predisposed to view a speaker as having a 'foreign' identity are likely to perceive that person's speech as accented, even when it is not (Rubin 1992; Derwing and Munro 2009). Nancy Niedzielski's (1996, 1999) work shows that people think the same sounds are more or less 'standard' depending on whether they are told the speaker is from Canada vs. right over the border in Detroit (participants, of course, viewed their own dialect as 'standard'). In Rubin's work, these beliefs lead to lower comprehension scores for listeners who think that they are listening to 'foreign accented speech' (even when they are not). To the extent that policies like this further stigmatize foreign accented speech, therefore, they are counterproductive to learning.

Stigmatizing 'accented' speech also perpetuates other kinds of social harm. The work of John Baugh of Stanford University demonstrates that American English speakers regularly engage in discriminatory practices of 'linguistic profiling' when making decisions such as hiring employees, admitting tenants, and the like. Accents associated with African American and Hispanic citizens are particular targets of the harmful effects of linguistic profiling (Baugh 2003), and to the extent that Arizona state policy supports discrimination against speakers based on 'accent', this policy continues these social harms.

8) There is no such thing as 'unaccented' speech, and so policies aimed at eliminating accented speech from the classroom are paradoxical.

When we say that someone has an 'accent', what we are really saying is that they speak in a way that sounds 'different' from a particular standard, or from our own pronunciation. Speakers are fully capable of drawing inferences about any person's place of origin, age, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status based on the way we talk – and this is certainly true for speakers of American English. Since all human linguistic production is characterized by particular patterns of sound that allow others to draw these conclusions, it is axiomatic that all of us speak 'with an accent'. The standard for instruction ought to be speaker intelligibility, not speaker identity – and intelligibility is distinct from 'accentedness'.

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