

Incorporating Vernacular into the Foreign Language Classroom: A Step in Curriculum Development

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Abstract

The vernacular variation of a language is overlooked in practically all foreign language classrooms. This oversight may be a deprivation to students in the learning process. This report discusses plans for research that will probe a curriculum development strategy to enhance the foreign language experience for students in higher education by including the vernacular variation of the target language. The research methods are discussed and it is anticipated that the learning experience for students will be enhanced, allowing them to communicate in the target language with a wider variety of natives as opposed to learning only the standard variation.

Keywords

Slang, Common Speech, Education, Textbooks, Research

1. Introduction

Students feel an overwhelming sense of accomplishment when they succeed in passing their foreign language course. However, passing the elementary level courses does not necessarily guarantee the acquisition of the speaking skill, and some of these students feel dismayed when they have mastered the concepts of the language but are unable to speak it. Moreover, the advanced students and even educators in the field are also dismayed when they are able to speak the language, but only with certain speakers, usually, those who speak the standard form of that language. As we discuss vernacular and the advantages of including it in our foreign language classrooms, the more generalized connotation of vernacular is also mentioned. This form of vernacular is simply the native language of the learner, which would make the target language the standard. But in terms

of vernacular as slang, we can pinpoint that standard-only skills in a foreign language can cause a barrier between the language learner and the native speakers of the language due to the fact that in numerous scenarios, the language learner may not be able to communicate effectively. It has been determined that "... there is an international trend to shift from linguistics diversity to plurilingual education" (Beacco & Byram, 2003; Atabekova et al., 2016). Foreign language educators boast about all the benefits of learning a foreign language and/or studying a foreign language while in school. One of the benefits is, obviously, the ability to communicate with a wide variety of people. Eton Institute (2021) declares the following statement regarding students learning a foreign language:

Foreign Language Study Increases Networking Skills

Opening up to a culture allows you to be more flexible and appreciative of other people's opinions and actions. As a result, if you are multilingual, you have the advantage of seeing the world from different viewpoints, enhancing your ability to communicate in today's globally connected world.

However, if students are limited on speakers with whom they can communicate, they will not reap all the benefits of what is supposedly guaranteed by learning a foreign language.

Although the speaking skill develops over time, even those who have learned the basics and are able to engage in a conversation based on topics covered in their foreign language classes, they are still not able to understand the more common forms of speech, which can still put them at a handicap. While we know that students who take part in study abroad and/or develop relationships with native speakers of the target language have opportunities to learn the common language forms, they may need more time than the allotted time for a study abroad trip and communicating with native-speaking friends in order to learn the common speech to the point of being able to confidently speak that form of the target language. In addition to gaining the skill to speak the vernacular and standard variations confidently, it makes sense that studies also show that students perform better in their language classes as a result of referring to the vernacular as well as the standard variation. What can foreign language educators do to break the barrier that would allow students to become more well-versed communicators in the target language?

As we ponder responses to this question considering vernacular in terms of the target language variation spoken by everyday speakers, we can reflect on the fact that students in higher education are given a wide variety of careers to pursue based on their skills and preferences regarding the future they have planned for themselves. They may choose to seek a career in political science, business, numerous science-related fields, social work, criminal justice, and countless others. If we examine these career paths, we can pinpoint that there may arise a need for employees in some of these fields to utilize the vernacular variation of a foreign language. Criminal justice is one of the fields of work that will allow em-

employees to encounter individuals from various walks of life. Not all of these individuals will be well-versed in the standard variation of their native language. Thus, foreign language educators should take into account the injustice we have rendered to students by educating them only in the standard variation of the target language. The planned study discussed is essential in preparing students for high performance in their chosen careers and community service by equipping them with the vernacular variation as well as the standard form of the target language being studied.

Although we will focus on vernacular as the non-standard language variation for foreign language students, the following previous studies will serve as a launching point in developing a methodology that will explore educating foreign language students as well as offer some food for thought on improving student performance by incorporating vernacular into the curriculum.

2. Vernacular Challenge/Previous Methodology

As we consider this topic of vernacular in our classrooms, it should come as no surprise that we are faced with the cultural challenge that as educators, vernacular is an entity to be avoided at all cost. We are warned that "... most teachers do not build artfully and skillfully on the vernacular" (Rickford, 2005). Rickford (2005) goes on to explain that not only do teachers adamantly reject vernacular, but they have full public support in doing so. It is believed that upon utilizing the vernacular variation of any language, one demonstrates a lack of knowledge and education in communication as opposed to the notion of becoming more diversified and broadening our linguistic horizons by utilizing the vernacular language variation. Rickford (2005) was referring to teachers of the English language in his above statement. These educators struggle to educate native English-speaking students to minimize their use of Ebonics in the English classroom in order to properly utilize standard English. In a study conducted by Taylor (1989) which focused on inner-city Chicago students attending Aurora University, a control group of students was taught strictly standard English while the experimental group was taught via the contrastive method in which the standard and vernacular (Ebonics) were differentiated, allowing students to focus on the correct way versus the incorrect way to write proper English. Taylor (1989) was successful with this method of study in terms of the objective of decreasing Ebonics among these students since 8.5% of the students in the control group demonstrated an increase in Ebonics and a whopping 59% of the students in the experimental group decreased their use of Ebonics in writing.

Before opposing the inclusion of vernacular in classrooms, we should first consider the context in which the vernacular is being used. Taylor (1989) was justified in the effort of decreasing the vernacular among inner-city Chicago students who were knowledgeable on the use of Ebonics but lacked skills in utilizing variations within the proper context. These students needed to learn the standard variation of the language, and then enhance their skills on when it's acceptable to use the vernacular and when it's acceptable to use the standard

variation.

We should not confuse this scenario with the global scenario of educating second language students to the vernacular as well as the standard in an attempt to prepare students to communicate with a wider range of target language speakers, giving them the advantages mentioned in the above rationale.

3. Vernacular Success/Previous Methodology

Despite opposition to the vernacular as a mode of enhancing communication skills and in-class performance, there is strong evidence that confirms success among students when beginning language study with the vernacular followed by the switch to the standard variation. According to Rickford (2005), Cheavens (1957) took a more generalized approach to researching foreign language studies with findings that “reported on studies around the world which showed that when you began by teaching kids in their vernacular or native language before switching to a second language which was not their vernacular, they tended to do better than if you began by teaching them in that second language directly” (Rickford, 2005). These findings in favor of vernacular were echoed in a study conducted in fourteen schools throughout Iloilo Province in the Philippines in which students who started in the Hiligaynon vernacular and later switched to English outperformed those who started with English as their target language. This study was conducted by Orata (1953), but Rickford (2005) adds that “what the researchers found is what other researchers have found in many other studies, ...” (Rickford, 2005).

If we attempt to make connections with Cheavens’s (1957) and Orata’s (1953) general viewpoint of vernacular and standard variations, we can pinpoint the findings of a contrast study that included “Bridge” readers which focused on Ebonics and standard readers who were taught by traditional, conventional teaching methods. Rickford (2005) described the participants in the study as five hundred and forty students from twenty-seven schools in the United States. This study, which was conducted by Simpkins and Simpkins (1981), concluded that the standard reading group only showed a 1.6-month reading gain, while the “Bridge” readers demonstrated a 6.2-month reading gain after four months of instruction and testing.

4. Theoretical Framework

If we ponder the question of what foreign language educators should do and where we should begin in the endeavor of educating students in the vernacular language variation, we can start where we are, which is the classroom. We can further expound on the concept of making the classroom more of a real-life scenario by incorporating vernacular into our daily lessons and assessments. As the above methodologies were centered on vernacular as the native language of the learners, let’s return to vernacular as the more common language variation of the target language as Stollhans (2020) “argues that standardised language norms

are artificial and language learners should learn about all aspects of language, even the controversial ones.” Stollhans (2020) raises three points of concern in the discussion regarding slang in the foreign language classroom:

There are concerns among professionals that introducing learners to “non-standard” language could lead to ambiguity and confusion and that students might be penalised for using it in the assessments.

Linguistic variation is a rich area of study that can appeal to language learners and have a positive impact on motivation.

Attitudes to language norms and variation in language teaching vary widely, and current textbooks deal with language variation in very different ways.

Stollhans (2020) raises several valid points, however, regarding the textbook, there is still work to be done on this issue. While textbooks include some vernacular in the introductory chapter when covering greetings, other terminology in this aspect are not commonly highlighted in the remaining chapters. Textbooks would be more welcome, and very much needed, to come aboard on this issue. With the aforementioned inclusion on the part of textbooks, educators would have the necessary launching point to implement the vernacular component into the foreign language classroom. As stated in the above introduction, “Language learners will need to be able to understand slang and dialect when mixing with so-called ‘native’ speakers...” (Stollhans, 2020). Moreover, “This process can be extremely creative and tell us a lot about other cultures. It can also be an important step towards a more diverse and inclusive curriculum. After all, language norms are often political and historical, and there are a variety of speakers of a language” (Stollhans, 2020). If we take a look back in history, it is even suggested “to use the vernaculars first as a bridge to French, then teach it as a subject...” (*The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, 1953). This was the common policy at the time in the African regions of Portugal, Italy, and possibly Spain.

5. Methodology

While the methodologies of Taylor (1989), Cheavens (1957), and Orata (1953) were based on Ebonics and vernacular as the native language of learners, this proposed methodology will be anchored in Stollhans’s (2020) school of thought, which proposes vernacular as slang or the non-standard variation for foreign language learners, but will still draw from the above methodologies when it is appropriate. With this in mind, research to implement this foreign language component will begin with a questionnaire to probe the thoughts of foreign language students at Johnson C. Smith University in the United States. The selected students will be four class sections of Spanish I students, which will be a total of 70 - 80 students. Students will be asked to reflect on their thoughts regarding advancing the target language variation and how this will increase their knowledge and ability to communicate in the target language. At this stage in the study, students will be allowed, and even encouraged, to engage in story-telling

in reference to their experiences and how including the vernacular in the curriculum would enhance the foreign language experience. Points of reflection will be future career goals, service to the community, and professional and personal connections with those who are native Spanish speakers. After the findings, educators will seek to reform textbooks to include this essential vocabulary, allowing instructors and students to engage in codeswitching, which is described as “a common strategy to achieve a range of social and pedagogical goals” (Probyn, 2009) in educating students on vernacular. Stollhans (2020) advises the following:

Curriculum leaders and teachers in the UK to make it their mission to enlighten learners about the rich and dynamic forms of variation a language entails when learning their first language—the first step to learning the complexity of other languages.

Examination boards to accept the use of non-standard variations in tests and examinations, in appropriate contexts.

Teacher training includes appropriate linguistics elements to sensitise teachers to issues around variation and equips them with the means to be able to make informed decisions about the inclusion of language varieties in their teaching. This is something Mr. Stollhans has been campaigning for with the national “Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages” network.

Group Study

Taylor (1989) was successful in a group study which allowed students to focus on their vernacular (Ebonics) versus standard English in accomplishing the objective of putting both variations into perspective, so in addition to allowing students to reflect via questionnaire, the research will include a group study to probe student performance as a result of incorporating the vernacular variation. Half the students will form the control group, which will be taught via conventional methods, while the other half of the participants will serve as those in the experimental group which will focus on association of the Spanish vernacular and the standard variation. This group will also refer to the vernacular of their native language (English), in reference to Cheavens (1957) and Orata (1953), while learning these expressions in the target language (Spanish). Lessons for the experimental group will include vocabulary and grammar, which will encourage consideration of the proper context for the variations. One of the most helpful activities may be role-playing and other written activities in which they will be instructed to respond formally (standard) or informally (vernacular).

6. Expected Findings

According to the findings of previous studies discussed, we can anticipate a positive outcome when the vernacular is included in the lessons. It is expected that the above research methods will yield results that demonstrate the majority of the students improving their performance in all categories (assessments, in-class assignments, and homework) as well as their knowledge of variation context.

Students will be able to tie their progress to career and personal goals they have set and anticipate a more promising future in these aspects.

The results of the questionnaire will allow us to better understand students and educate them as they broaden their linguistic skills in the target language. Students will be able to communicate with a wider variety of native speakers in various scenarios as a result of learning the vernacular variation. It is anticipated that these skills will make our students marketable in their chosen careers and help them to live and work as global citizens.

7. Future Research

With continued research on more cases and methodologies in vernacular as a native language and non-standard language variation, the above-expected findings will lead to curriculum development practices to include target language vernacular in the classroom and textbooks. The current ebook in the course of the study is *Aventuras* 6th edition, which has laid a foundation for the vernacular by stressing the formal and informal uses of the target language. The introductory chapter discusses formal and informal greetings and farewells (p. 1), which are introduced in the Communicative Goals section as “greet people in Spanish, say goodbye, ...identify yourself and others, and investigate greetings in the Spanish-speaking world” (Blanco & Donley, 2022), and later in the chapter appears a cultural reading, *Los saludos y el espacio personal* (Greetings and personal space) (p. 10), that could serve as a launching point for reflection on vernacular and standard language variations. The grammar, which covers nouns and articles (p. 12) and other structures, could also be paired with vernacular and dialect. The remaining Chapters (2 - 4) provide the same opportunities to incorporate the vernacular into the vocabulary, grammar, and culture.

Due to the fact that previous studies show that students perform better in their language classes when the general vernacular (native language) is learned first, it is necessary to investigate the inclusion of the native language during the foreign language experience. Many oppose any reference to the native language of the learner when learning a foreign language, but textbooks include English translations for key terms and grammatical structures. An in-depth study on reference to the native language by way of translation is helpful in the learning experience, or is it more beneficial to exclude all translation, which would mean a “no English spoken here” environment.

In closing, we also hope to join primary and secondary school systems in efforts with the assistance of policymakers as well as conducting studies and making changes in the foreign language curriculum similar to the above studies and proposed changes in making our children more college-ready.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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