

Language, Language Variety, and Equity

Freedom of linguistic expression is a basic human right. Every language has its own complexity, creativity and worth and holds within it an accompanying culture and way of knowing and understanding the world. Every language is worthy of being used in all aspects of life including within classrooms, board rooms, and media outlets.

All forms of a language and all languages are equally valuable, yet all forms of a language and all languages are not equally valued. People make linguistic judgments about one another, and these judgments are an indication of biases, othering, and even racism.

The 'standard' (henceforth *standardized*) language is no more worthy than any other variety of a language. In practice, it is the more widely accepted variety, promoted in educational institutions and work environments. The fact that the standardized language is deemed more acceptable is harmful because when people believe that one variety of a language is superior to another, injustice is done to those who do not speak the standardized variety. Misconceptions of intelligence, worth and value are attributed to those who do not conform to a standardized variety of speech or that speak with an accent that differs from the standard. Research in linguistics affirms that all speakers of a language have an accent and there are no correct or incorrect accents.

The belief that there is one correct way of speaking a language, or one correct accent, is evidence of language ideologies and policies that reinforce linguistic hierarchies and delegitimize and oppress non-standard speakers. Language use is a powerful indicator of personal identity. By delegitimizing the language variety used by an individual, that individual's identity is being devalued. Thus institutions and persons who reinforce hierarchies among languages and language varieties are inherently discriminatory.

Our Position

We, the TESOL program at Florida International University, inspired by our colleagues at the University of Michigan, assert our firm belief that all people and all languages and varieties of languages are equally valuable. Freedom of linguistic expression is a basic human right. As educators and applied linguists, we strongly oppose all acts of discrimination, specifically those that discriminate based on language and culture.

We stand steadfastly against the idea that any one person, cultural or linguistic group holds more value than another. There is no scientific validity to the idea that one language or one culture is superior to another. There is no legitimacy to the claim that one variety of language use, or one cultural practice has more value than another. Beliefs that hold one cultural group or one language as superior are based in hierarchical systems of oppression and domination. These systems often stem from historical instances of colonization, slavery, and socioeconomic subjugation of less powerful groups.

Similarly, beliefs that hold that one variety of a specific language is more prestigious or correct than another are based on comparable sociocultural factors. As teacher educators, we are firmly committed to undoing power structures inside and outside the classroom that are oppressive and discriminatory, and that advantage specific groups of persons while subjugating others. We stand for equity in all forms of education and full acceptance of all language varieties.

How can you help?

The following are some examples of how to support language justice and equity inside and outside of the classroom.

- Be wary of correcting the grammar or pronunciation of others
- Do not assume that someone is speaking 'broken' or 'bad' English just because they are speaking a non-standard variety of English
- Do not make assumptions of intelligence or education based on a person's accent or use of a non-standard language variety
- Celebrate multilingualism and encourage the maintenance of the native language
- Recognize that biliteracy is beneficial and highly valued
- Allow for a variety of ways of using language in the classroom
- Include readings, videos, and other classroom materials that celebrate the diversity within languages
- Include readings, videos, and other classroom materials that have been generated by scholars who are not part of the mainstream language and culture of the classroom
- Give students a variety of opportunities for showing what they know that include the use of non-standard varieties of language
- Recognize that standard American English is a specific variety of English that can be used in the classroom but is not inherently superior to any other variety of English.
- Provide the support and assistance to speakers of nonstandard varieties of language that they need in order to use and understand the standard variety if that is the expectation of the classroom

Resources

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Truscott, J. (2007). The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately. *Journal of second language Writing*, 16(4), 255-272. [https://www-sciencedirect-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/science/article/pii/S1060374307000355?via %3Dihub](https://www-sciencedirect-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/science/article/pii/S1060374307000355?via%3Dihub) is a meta-analysis of the effect of error correction -- error correction seems to slightly negatively impact writing

UM Language Matters (2021) FAQs

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