Developing Language Awareness Materials for Nonlinguists: Lessons Learned from the Do You Speak American? Curriculum Development Project

Jeffrey Reaser* and Carolyn Adger
North Carolina State University and the Center for Applied Linguistics

Abstract

Current work in linguistics is not well represented in the school curriculum in the USA, partly because of a mismatch with traditional foci in the K-12 (kindergarten through twelfth grade) standard course of studies and because there are very few materials for teaching about the nature of language and language variation. This article sketches the process of developing curricular materials to accompany the 3-hour video documentary, Do You Speak American? and suggests some of the decisions that must be made in developing materials for educational settings concerning scientific knowledge about language.

1. Introduction

Two pioneers of sociolinguistics in the USA, William Labov and Walt Wolfram, have underscored the importance of using research findings to benefit the society, especially the populations that sociolinguists study. Specifically, Labov’s (1982) ‘principle of debt incurred’ and Wolfram’s (1993) ‘principle of linguistic gratuity’ charge linguists to make language information available to and accessible by the general public. This charge includes finding ways to educate the public about language ideologies (Lippi-Green 1997; Fairclough 2001), the nature of language variation, and the negative effects that flow from common incorrect assumptions about variation. However, there are relatively few resources that can be used for this purpose. Among the explanations for this dearth may be that writing and preparing video materials for general audiences requires knowledge and skills for reaching them that have not been part of linguists’ training and experience and that this type of endeavor typically offers little reward in terms of promotion and tenure (Hall 2002). This is not to say that there have not been successful linguistic outreach projects. The video documentary American tongues (Alvarez & Kolker 1987) is one example of an appealing, accessible, and accurate presentation of linguistic
research for a general audience; the book *Spoken soul: The story of Black English* (Rickford & Rickford 2000) is another.

Recently, we developed curricular materials (Reaser et al. 2005) for using the documentary *Do You Speak American?* (henceforth, *DYSA*) (MacNeil/Lehrer 2005) in high school, college, and teacher education settings. *DYSA* is a sociolinguistic travelog featuring narrator Robert MacNeil, who interviews a number of sociolinguists and others interested in language use in various communities. Although *DYSA* was produced for broadcast on public television, the producers expanded its educational potential by developing a rich set of online resources (www.pbs.org/speak) accessible through the web-enabled DVD version of the program. These resources include essays by linguists and others, maps, and games. MacNeil/Lehrer Productions also contracted with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), with funding from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation of New York, to develop related teaching and learning materials.

The opportunity to develop sociolinguistics curriculum units appealed to CAL staff members who had been concerned about the lack of attention to language and linguistics in the school curriculum. When the possibility of a curriculum to accompany *DYSA* was first broached, in 2002, states were implementing new curriculum standards that in many cases include more attention to language diversity. This change was prompted, in part, by the *Language arts curriculum standards of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)* (http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm), which influenced many states’ standards. Those standards specify that students should ‘develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles’ (NCTE/IRA 1996:3). The new standards seemed to invite attention to language, but the paucity of materials threatened this prospect. Few teachers have the time or the knowledge to develop learning activities and to generate or adopt information sources on language. Thus, CAL welcomed the prospect of developing materials that would make a commercial product on language more useful for educational purposes.

Although *DYSA* does not have as strong a basis in linguistic research as it could have had, given the membership of linguists on its advisory board, parts of the program can be used to interest students in linguistics. For CAL, the challenge was to develop a rich curriculum using the program and materials from the *DYSA* web site complemented by pedagogical resources that we would write. This article outlines the development process with an emphasis on the pedagogical and practical considerations that grounded decisions about what information to highlight and how to present it so that teachers with little or no formal training in linguistics could use the *DYSA* materials. We focus on the importance of identifying and taking into account the assumptions and expectations of teachers and
students who would use the materials. In highlighting these considerations, we hope that our experiences will be useful to other linguists who will address the urgent need for school curriculum materials.

2. Considerations in Developing the DYSA Curriculum

Curriculum development typically begins with identifying a body of knowledge to be taught. In the DYSA curriculum development project, however, we began with a product and worked backward to identify topics, based on what the program and the related web site offered. The greatest challenges in developing the DYSA educational curriculum stemmed from the fact that the program was developed for an audience of viewers who are generally interested in language – not for the purpose of teaching and learning about the sociolinguistic situation in the USA. Moreover, at 3 hours, the documentary is quite long for viewing in an educational setting. To gain insight into the program’s value for educational settings, we conducted two kinds of focus groups with potential viewers: one with young people (a group of middle schoolers and a group of high schoolers) and one with high school English teachers near Washington, DC. We also asked a high school English teacher in North Carolina to show the program to her junior and senior English classes and collect student responses to the video. All of the respondents found the program appealing, but they concurred that it was not the kind of video typically shown at school. However, the teachers suggested that they would use parts of the film with certain classes (generally, juniors and seniors in advanced classes) if additional materials were available to expand their understanding. The information gleaned from these focus groups was invaluable in creating a quality curriculum that could be useful to teachers and students.

2.1 Determining Video Content

To address both the time problem and the appropriateness problem, we decided to select parts of the program and adopt a thematic approach in organizing them into units. We began by listing the major themes in DYSA and then looking for ways to organize units around them. We settled on five thematic units: Perspectives on written and spoken English; Major regional dialects; African American English; Spanish and Chicano English; and Communicative choices and linguistic style (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/). For each of these units, we selected video vignettes from various places in the broadcast (for each unit, video footage totals between 18 and 35 minutes). To ensure that teachers could easily navigate the DVDs for maximum control over what to show and not show to their classes, we proposed a series of DVD chapter and section breaks to the producers. One example arose out of previewing the video
with the teacher focus group. Teachers noted that they would not be allowed to show an interview with Texas humorist Kinky Friedman because he is smoking a cigar. Thus, it was important to allow teachers to skip by this chapter if their school prohibits showing tobacco use. In the curriculum materials that we developed, all video sections are described succinctly for teachers, and sections that might be inappropriate for some audiences are noted.

Selecting thematically relevant vignettes across the program rather than developing materials to support use of the program in full meant that some sections of DYSA were not used in any of the five thematic units. But doing so made it possible to develop a topically focused, coherent, and pedagogically sound curriculum that can be used to teach students about some of the major issues surrounding language diversity in the USA.

2.2 rounding out the curriculum

After selecting video vignettes and organizing them into thematic units, we turned to developing the curriculum units into which the vignettes would fit – background information for the teacher, suggestions for teaching the unit, and lists of additional resources. In doing so, it was necessary to make judgments about providing enough information without overwhelming the user. As an illustration of this consideration, imagine creating an exercise about r-dropping, a phonological process discussed in DYSA. This kind of exercise can help students extend their understanding of dialects beyond what they know already and what they learn from watching the program. A lesson including attention to r-dropping could have a number of parts addressing different learning goals:

- the basic linguistic constraints that govern r-lessness, such as preceding and following phonetic environments;
- the more complex linguistic constraints that govern r-dropping, such as whether the r is stressed syllabic, stressed nuclear, or unstressed;
- the social factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity) that correspond to rates of r-dropping;
- the regional distribution of r-dropping;
- the history of r-dropping in English and American dialects;
- the role of r-dropping as a linguistic marker (i.e. how it patterns with style shifting)
- r-dropping as a feature that marks complex qualitative differences between some American dialects and important quantitative differences within some American dialects. In other words, some dialects do it and some do not. But individuals within the dialect groups who do it, do not do it all the time. Variable frequencies in individual speakers correlate with complex social and linguistic factors, and speech style may cause variation within the idiolect of individual speakers.
Clearly there is more information in the last point of this list than is reasonable to include in a curriculum unit for high school students who are not taking a linguistics course. Depending on the purpose of the exercise, some of the other information on the list might be appropriate. In a project of this type, it was important to make sure that activities and exercises concerning rlessness are achievable by students and consistent with the goals of the curriculum.

While researchers might be tempted to include more rather than less information in each learning activity, doing so can impede teachers’ understanding and discourage students from trying to comprehend complicated material. For this reason, we created a number of activities that we judged to be accessible to a nontechnical audience for each unit – more than any single teacher would use – with the intention that the teacher would select those exercises appropriate for his or her students. We endeavored to make everything in the curriculum relevant to the goals of the curriculum and coherent with other information in the curriculum. Information for the sake of comprehensiveness was judged not to be useful: teachers would not know what to do with it, and students would not know how to connect it to other knowledge.

2.3 Making the Teacher the Expert

One of the biggest challenges in writing language awareness materials for high school is the fact that few teachers have a strong background in linguistics or language variation, if any at all, despite the recommendations of the NCTE that all teacher education programs teach prospective teachers:

How and why language varies and changes in different regions, across different cultural groups, and across different time periods and incorporate that knowledge into classroom instruction and assessment that acknowledge and show consistent respect for language diversity. (NCTE/NCATE 2003:11–12)

However, even teachers who meet this standard are likely to find it difficult to include such information in their lessons because of the lack of materials that provide the support they need.

If materials developed by linguists are to be used successfully in K–12 (kindergarten through twelfth grade) settings, they must be readily accessible to teachers: Those without a strong linguistic background must be able to use them in teaching students who will ask questions and raise issues. To provide support to teachers, each DYSA unit contains the following sections (all of which appear as hyperlinks at the top of the unit plan): Overview, Key Ideas, Key Terms, NCTE Standards Addressed by this Unit, Student Objectives, Using the Unit, Video Sections Used in this Unit, Description of Video Segments, Background Information, Discussion Questions, Student Activities/Assessments, and Resources. Each of these sections is described briefly below, and a link is provided to that section
in the high school version of the Perspectives on written and spoken English unit, which was designed as an introduction to issues of language attitude and approaches to language such as prescriptivism and descriptivism, and as a lead-in to the other units.

The Overview provides a two or three paragraph description of the unit. The Key Ideas section is a bulleted list of the major ideas that students will come to know during the unit. These are tied to the Student Objectives. The NCTE Standards section explains the relevance of each unit to the NCTE standards, which are reflected in many state standards. Using the Unit is an outline of suggestions for what teachers can do before, during, and after teaching the unit. It includes suggestions for reading articles in the DYSA web site and other resources before teaching, selecting exercises from the unit that can be used together effectively, leading discussion of sensitive or inflammatory issues, and extending students’ learning. The component on Video Sections Used in this Unit lists the section and chapter numbers of the video sections on the DVD with their length and mentions the ones that might be unsuitable for some audiences. This information is followed by annotations of each segment in the Description of Video Segments section.

Background Information is the lengthiest section of each unit. It distills information from linguistic study and refers to the extensive online resources associated with the program. We endeavored to present this information in a way that is accessible to a nontechnical audience. As an example of the sort of information that is included, the Background Information section in the unit on African American English (AAE) has the following parts: Brief History of AAE; The Features of AAE: A Brief Overview; and The Ann Arbor Decision (which is featured prominently in DYSA).

The Discussion Questions section for each video chapter in each DYSA unit (each chapter runs between one and 5 minutes) includes one to five discussion questions that are intended to help teachers generate and guide discussion of key issues illustrated in the video and help students meet the Student Objectives in the lesson. These questions are a crucial element of the units: They are intended to stimulate students’ engagement with critical
issues illustrated by the film and deconstruct some language stereotypes in order to motivate desired changes in language knowledge and attitudes. Similarly, the Student Activities/Assessments (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/perspectives/#act) are designed to reinforce the Student Objectives (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/perspectives/#obj) and be usable by teachers. When appropriate, answer keys are provided with explanations of desirable answers. The Resources (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/perspectives/#res) section contains a number of links to the maps, articles, and linked web sites in the DYSA database. It also has a list of five to ten print sources that teachers might find useful. These sources were selected in part as being readily available and accessible to teachers. Annotations for each are intended to aid in selecting texts.

In several ways, we attempted to make the curriculum attractive to teachers. The content that we developed is intended to make the units as transparent as possible so that the teacher can use them to teach students about American speech with some degree of authority on the subject. We did this both by including information not supplied by the film and by wrestling with the question of unfamiliar terminology, as the following section explains. The sections of the units listed above mirror those commonly found in unit plans so that teacher expectations are fulfilled. In addition, there is an online Teachers’ Manual (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/guides/) with information about how to integrate the DYSA curriculum into instruction, as well as suggested ordering and clustering of units.

2.4 USING AND AVOIDING SPECIALIZED LINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGY

Wolfram (1998) shows that many of the misunderstandings associated with the Oakland Ebonics resolution were due to differences between how linguists and the general public understand terms such as genetic and grammatical. One of the problems linguists face in addressing a nontechnical audience is related to the fact that because language is in the public sphere, the general public has relatively consistent understandings of terms like Standard English, slang, grammar, language, and dialect. In the field of linguistics, these terms are used in fundamentally different ways and, in fact, do not lend themselves easily to straightforward definition. As an example of this disjunction, nonlinguists may use the term grammatical or ungrammatical to comment on how similar or dissimilar a particular utterance or written sentence is to the norms of English usage as prescribed by various style guides and dictionaries. Even dialect-related pronunciations (e.g. /diz/ for these) may be called ‘poor grammar’. In linguistics, however, the term grammar refers to the system of patterns that make up a language. All linguistic varieties have rules that govern when a speaker can and cannot use a particular form. For instance, Standard
English requires the use of the past participle form of a verb in perfective constructions (e.g. he has eaten). Some patterns of some dialects may be judged unacceptable by the general public; but linguistically speaking, as long as the usage conforms to the patterns of a group’s grammar, it is grammatical. Thus, an African American English speaker who says Sometimes my ears be itching is uttering a grammatical sentence as in African American English, the finite form of the verb be is used to indicate a habitual or reoccurring action. Another label used generally to describe such an utterance is slang. For linguists, however, slang refers to a short-lived (usually) vocabulary item that is used by members of a particular group. Thus, the linguistic definition and the popular definition of the term are at odds.

In preparing the DYSA materials, we continually dealt with the necessity of distinguishing technical and popular meanings. The general guideline that we followed in determining whether or not to use a specialized linguistic term was to judge whether the term was necessary or useful in helping students acquire the framework necessary to understand and discuss issues of language variation.

While it is not terribly difficult to avoid technical terminology in an outreach project, much of the terminology that required special treatment in the DSYA curriculum occurred in the video. One example is the term Ebonics, which is used several times in DSYA. Because this term is understood differently by linguists and nonlinguists, it was necessary to define it. We accomplished this with hyperlinks to an online glossary (http://www.pbs.org/speak/about/guide/#glossary) and to online articles (http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/AAVE/ebonics/) that explain differences between popular and scientific notions of Ebonics, written by linguist John Baugh. There are links to the online articles at several points in the curricular unit on African American English, first in the Overview (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/aae/#overview) – which is the first section that a viewer sees – and then again under the Resources (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/aae/#resources) subheading. Moreover, at each occurrence of this and certain other terms, there are hyperlinks to the online glossary. Each of the terms is also listed in the unit’s Key Terms (http://www.pbs.org/speak/education/curriculum/high/aae/#keyterms) with a hyperlink. One of the advantages of the online format over a print format is that the availability of hyperlinks makes it easy to integrate an online glossary into the curriculum. As an example, the term Ebonics is defined this way in the glossary:

A term coined in 1973, combining the words ebony (black) and phonics (sounds), to refer to the distinctive speech of African Americans. The term was not commonly used by the public until 1996, when the school board in Oakland, California, recognized Ebonics as the primary language of its African American students, inciting a very public controversy. See African American English.
One of the lessons learned from creating the DYSA curriculum that may be applicable to similar projects is that it is most efficient to determine what vocabulary to include in the glossary at an early stage in development. Doing so prevents having to search the document(s) for possibly problematic vocabulary after the content has been created and insert links then. It also helps to keep technical terms consistent across the curriculum, and it discourages using synonyms or near synonyms for technical terms that might confuse users: a key consideration in creating user-friendly resources. And finally it helps to make the text more succinct because there is no need to explain or provide examples of a term at each use.

2.5 WRITING STYLE

Writing for those outside the discipline can be challenging for academics who are used to writing for scholarly publication and who tend to favor dense and somewhat oblique prose (Hall 2002). Despite our best efforts to craft the curriculum so that it was accessible to nonlinguists, English teachers who commented on an early draft of the DYSA curriculum suggested that the prose was somewhat stilted. They also objected to the mix of first, second, and third person. In response, we revised the text to make it more reportorial. We also took out instances of first person (mostly we used to refer to speakers in a general way, such as We all speak a dialect), and we used the second person consistently in activities and discussion questions so that teachers would not have to change them at all when addressing their classes.

2.6 OTHER INSTRUCTIONAL CONCERNS

In addition to decisions about appropriate content, appropriately presented, we were concerned with practical considerations and pedagogical principles. Given the fact that language and linguistics has not been a focus in K-12 education and thus teachers might have quite variable views of what to teach, we endeavored to make the curriculum flexible. Teachers can select which units to use and how to use the materials in designing lessons of an appropriate length. They can select which DYSA clips to show (the clips were kept short so that students would not lose focus and so that teachers would have a manageable chunk of material to discuss), which discussion questions to ask, and which activities and readings to assign. The materials also include suggestions of ways to expand the units, such as having students do additional reading, research, and creative writing projects, and having them gather data on language usage (e.g. collecting examples of and analyzing how students use the term like; having students collect and rewrite examples of sentence-ending prepositions from various sources as a means of discovering patterns in language usage; or having
students search for usage ‘errors’ in advertisements and decide whether the errors were intentional and, if, so, why they were included).

Another practical consideration derived from the fact that the standards and curriculum frameworks to which school districts’ curricula must be faithful are determined by states and school districts, and these vary. While the states have drawn on standards established by national organizations, each set of state standards departs from the national organization standards in various ways. Still, we believe that these national organizations’ standards remain the best anchor for crafting materials that are usable across the USA. Thus the online DYSA Teachers’ Manual cites three standards from NCTE’s Standards for the English language arts (NCTE/IRA 1996) and includes a discussion of how DYSA can be used to meet them. It also includes five standards from the National Council for the Social Studies (1994) and explains how the curriculum can help meet these standards. The two sets of standards are included because the content of the DYSA curriculum is multidisciplinary and may be reasonably used as part of a language arts class or a social studies class.

In an era of increased educational accountability, it is important to help teachers know how they can justify instructional attention to language variation. There is a limit on what can be taught in schools, and currently standards-based curricula and standardized testing are driving choices. Thus it is incumbent upon linguists working on educational outreach projects to be aware of these constraints and seek ways to work within existing educational frameworks instead of challenging them. Doing so should make teachers more receptive to using such materials in their classrooms. This highlights another important area in which linguists should focus their efforts: teacher education programs. This is the area targeted by the college-level version of the DYSA curriculum.

Pedagogical concerns drove development too. Table 1 shows that the DYSA curriculum provides opportunities for teachers to accommodate

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning style (intelligence)</th>
<th>Activity/curricular component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual (spatial)</td>
<td>Watching video vignettes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aural (musical)</td>
<td>Some of the regional and cultural vignettes involve music (e.g. folk music and hip hop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal (linguistic)</td>
<td>Lecture and teacher-led discussions (e.g. overview, background information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical (kinesthetic)</td>
<td>Maps of dialect regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical (mathematical)</td>
<td>Analyzing be patterning in African American English (AAE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (interpersonal)</td>
<td>Group work/cooperative learning (e.g. organized class debates on the Ann Arbor decision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary (intrapersonal)</td>
<td>Individual exercises (e.g. a- prefixing exercise)</td>
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multiple learning styles, a concept that grew out of the work of Howard Gardner (1983). A variety of instructional arrangements is accommodated. There is material in the units and in the additional resources that teachers can use to develop direct instruction, but the activities emphasize group learning. Well-designed group activities have positive effects on learning because they require students to engage actively (Bligh 2000).

3. Conclusions

This article describes the process by which the DYSA curriculum came to be and sketches some of the practical and pedagogical considerations that shaped it. We have highlighted the challenges we faced and the decisions we made in the hope that our experience can be of benefit to other linguists or social scientists who develop curriculum materials for use in schools and teacher education programs.

The case of adapting a product developed by nonlinguists, as with the DYSA curriculum project, is particularly challenging because it may involve deciding how to deal with content that is not relevant to language study. But there are other considerations as well. We faced the question of what grade levels DYSA was appropriate for. With advice from students and teachers, we determined that some of the video content was inappropriate for middle school students and that the program was generally suited to older high school and college students. This limitation was disappointing: We had expected to prepare materials for middle and high school students, an age group that has responded positively to other dialect awareness materials (Reaser 2006).

It is tempting to believe that making linguistic research available to a nontechnical audience is a matter of writing an interesting book or producing a film with a brief study guide. Our experience in developing the DYSA materials argues otherwise. Materials prepared for a general audience, however appealing and informative, cannot stand on their own in schools. They must be accompanied by detailed user guides that marry the knowledge and skills of teachers with the content of the linguistic materials and acknowledge the constraints of their professional context. We believe that it is essential for curriculum developers from outside education to have access to research on pedagogy and an understanding of best practices of instruction and curriculum design. They must also be knowledgeable about the workings of schools and school systems. These requirements suggest that linguists would do well to work with colleagues in the field of education on outreach projects.

We also want to stress the importance of working closely with teachers throughout the development process, listening to and learning from what they have to say. The teachers who participated in our focus group and review process were invaluable in identifying and excluding themes, video footage, and learning activities and assessments. They also helped
tremendously in pointing out our incorrect assumptions about teachers’ and students’ language knowledge and our overly complex writing style.

Producing outreach materials is both time consuming and challenging because there are a number of decisions to be made. The best curriculum resources will be not only linguistically sound but also informed by the groups who will be using them, and this collaboration takes time to arrange and carry out. But the opportunity to offer findings from still-esoteric linguistic research to teachers and students is exciting. We hope that other linguists will be emboldened to step outside the academic setting to help educate young people about the nature of language variation. Further, we hope that outlining some of the choices we made in developing the DYSA curriculum will prove useful to other researchers who strive to meet the charges of the ‘principle of debt incurred’ and the ‘principle of linguistic gratuity’ (Labov 1982; Wolfram 1993, respectively).

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the teachers and linguists who contributed their time and expertise to the DYSA video and curriculum projects. Whether they appeared in the film, submitted materials for the web site, or simply fielded questions from us, they contributed in an important way to spreading information about language diversity, which we hope will begin to undermine entrenched language ideologies.

Short Biographies

Jeffrey Reaser is an assistant professor in the teacher education and linguistics programs at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC, USA. His primary research interest is developing, implementing, and measuring the effects of dialect awareness programs in public schools. He is co-author of curricular materials supporting the Public Broadcasting Service documentary Do You Speak American? and the Voices of North Carolina dialect awareness curriculum.

Carolyn Temple Adger directs the Language in Society Division at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. She has conducted several studies of classroom discourse and interaction among teachers in a professional development setting and has applied linguistic research in work with teachers of English language learners. Her publications include Dialects in Schools and Communities (co-authored) and What Teachers Need to Know About Language (co-edited).

Endnote

* Correspondence address: Jeffrey Reaser, Department of English, NC State University, Campus Box 8105, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA.

Works Cited


