Student attitudes in online and face-to-face environments

Observing the acquisition of secondary objectives

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How effectively are attitudinal objectives transmitted when they're not the primary focus of a course?

Are they transmitted as effectively in online and face-to-face environments?

Attitudinal objectives in linguistics

In the undergraduate teaching of linguistics, the primary learning objectives in most courses are directed toward students' acquisition of an understanding of the theories, principles, and methodologies of linguistics. However, a secondary objective of nearly all undergraduate (and some graduate) linguistics courses is the dispelling a number of "language myths" (as Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill named them). Some of these language myths have a purely objective component (e.g., In the Appalachians they speak like Shakespeare), but most are tightly tied to social attitudes (e.g., They speak really bad English down South and in New York City).

Testing attitudes directly

Measuring individuals' linguistic attitudes is actually a large part of certain strands of linguistic (especially sociolinguistic) research. This is generally done using a Likert scale with an odd number of points. However, since any odd-numbered Likert scale approach is subject to a central tendency bias, especially in a case where the subjects are being asked questions they may not be entirely secure about, testing students' attitudes should use a scale with an even number of points (probably four), and the scale should be forced-choice, with no "not sure/don't know" options. Examples of questions that could be asked include those give below, all preceded by "Please describe your level of agreement with the following statement".

- ⊙ "Regional dialects" (e.g., Southern English, New York City English) are just as correct as Standard English.
- ⊙ People use non-standard dialects out of laziness.
- ⊙ Some languages have no grammar.
- ⊙ German is an ugly language
- ⊙ Slang is bad.

It is perhaps impossible to completely correct for the potential of social desirability bias, but it is probably worth closing with a question like the one below.

- ⊙ While taking this survey, I answered some of these questions the way I thought my teacher wanted them answered instead of what I actually thought.

The wider issue

Linguistics is, of course, not alone in having secondary attitudinal objectives to go along with the primary learning objectives of its courses. Linguistics is also not alone in seeing more and more of its courses delivered online. This is a challenge for instructors. While the primary objectives of a course can be laid out in lessons to be read by students, it is difficult to do that as completely for secondary objectives, for fear they will dilute the primary objectives. Further, in face-to-face classes, issues relating to attitudes and the dispelling of misconceptions are likely to come up in classroom discussions, but there is less in the way of such teacher-student interaction in online courses.

Language myths

Below are the "language myths" (some of which are just examples of larger issues) that linguistics classes need to confront, as compiled by Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill:

- ⊙ The meanings of words should not be allowed to vary or change
- ⊙ Some languages are just not good enough
- ⊙ The media are ruining English
- ⊙ French is a logical language
- ⊙ English spelling is kattastroffik
- ⊙ Women talk too much
- ⊙ Some languages are harder than others
- ⊙ Children can't speak or write properly any more
- ⊙ In the Appalachians they speak like Shakespeare
- ⊙ Some languages have no grammar
- ⊙ Italian is beautiful, German is ugly
- ⊙ Bad grammar is slovenly
- ⊙ Black children are verbally deprived
- ⊙ Double negatives are illogical
- ⊙ TV makes people sound the same
- ⊙ You shouldn't say "It is me" because "me" is accusative
- ⊙ They speak really bad English down South and in New York City
- ⊙ Some languages are spoken more quickly than others
- ⊙ Aborigines speak a primitive language
- ⊙ Everyone has an accent except me
- ⊙ America is ruining the English language

Testing student attitudes

Testing attitudes, of course, can be a tricky process. Asking questions about attitudes, whether true-false (e.g., Is American Sign Language just English done with hand motions?) or scalar (e.g., Speakers of dialect X talk that way because they're lazy), are subject to any number of possible biases, particularly in the case of linguistic attitudes to social desirability bias, so care must be taken to correct for any such problems. Since the crucial issue here is whether online instruction differs from face-to-face modes, it seems sensible to test face-to-face and online sections of the same class, with identical tests administered at the beginning and end (and possibly middle) of each class to gauge attitudinal shifts.

Testing attitudes indirectly

Perhaps more important than direct testing of attitudes is the indirect testing of attitudes. This can be accomplished by using a few different methods.

One method for measuring attitudes would be to have students rate sentences in terms of acceptability for a particular context or grammaticality, such as the ones below.

- ⊙ Assume you were talking with friends at a restaurant, and the coffee was not warm. Please rank the following sentences in order from most to least acceptable.
  - ○ The coffee is cold.
  - ○ The coffee's cold.
  - ○ The coffee cold.
  - ○ The coffee be cold.
  - ○ The coffee am cold.
- ⊙ Please mark which of the sentences below are grammatical in casual African-American English.
  - ○ The coffee is cold.
  - ○ The coffee's cold.
  - ○ The coffee cold.
  - ○ The coffee be cold.
  - ○ The coffee am cold.

In answering these questions, the students will show whether they have internalized the attitudes linguistics courses are supposed to be teaching, because correct answers require thinking beyond "grammar rule" answers.

What this means for linguistics

There has been some effort recently to find ways to make undergraduate linguistics courses more compelling and interesting for students. This study will go in a somewhat different direction—it will give insight as to whether linguistics courses are successful in transmitting secondary attitudinal objectives, and whether different modes of instruction are differently successful at doing so. That is, it will answer two sets of questions: Do linguistics courses succeed in transmitting the values of the field to the students, and do students accept them? and, Does the lack of direct interaction in online teaching environments affect the transmission and acceptance of these values?

What this means more broadly

This study will have impacts outside of linguistics, as well. To begin with the transmission of secondary attitudinal objectives is an issue in many fields (as mentioned above), whether it's sociology courses promoting a particular way of looking at social systems, or physics courses promoting more openness toward scientific study, or whatever. This study will help us all understand the degree to which it is possible to say that college courses can have such outcomes. Also, with the push across academia to deliver more courses online teaching, it is vital that we understand even the subtle differences in outcomes between delivery methods. This study will also give insight into that issue.

What next?

This poster outlines a proposed study; as a result, the first step is to develop the survey that will be used. The handout gives some questions that I have come up with so far, and I welcome any ideas for additional or better-phrased questions.

I am teaching a face-to-face section of History of the English Language in the fall semester, and plan on teaching it online in a later semester. I will keep the course content and assignments the same between courses, thus giving me the chance to directly compare student reactions in the face-to-face and online environments.

Handouts

Selected references on linguistics pedagogy

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