Tema

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM: MAKING "SMALL" PEDAGOGICAL CHANGES TO PROMOTE EQUITY

Questo articolo propone un metodo per integrare le questioni della giustizia sociale—in particolare, la (dis)ugualianza linguistica—nel contenuto dei corsi esistenti, sfruttando il potere del curriculum nascosto. Apportando piccole modifiche ai loro corsi e impegnandosi di studiare l'efficacia di tali cambiamenti, gli istruttori possono promuovere messaggi taciti, ma di grande impatto, sull'importanza della diversità, dell'equità, e dell'inclusione, che gli studenti possono portare con loro nel futuro.

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Introduction

In Season 6, Episode 12 of the Netflix television show *Orange is the New Black* (Graham & Johnson, 2018), main character Tasha ("Taystee") Jefferson (played by Danielle Brooks) finds herself on the witness stand in her own trial, defending her actions as the lead negotiator during a riot that had taken place in the prison where she is incarcerated. When asked about how she ended up in prison, Taystee (a Black woman) speaks about her experiences as a child, saying, "When I aged out of group home, I didn't have nowhere else—excuse me—*anywhere* else to live, so I stayed with a lady dealer who gave me a bed in exchange for me handling her account books" (41:49–42:10). Shortly thereafter, she explains her motivation for taking on a leadership role during the riot: to seek justice for her recently deceased friend. She explains, "Well, I had a best friend once. And the entire time I knew her, she never let me down. And then she was killed by a guard when she didn't even do nothing... *anything*" (43:01–43:28).

Twice during this short scene, Taystee "corrects" her language on the stand, changing from the grammatical pattern of multiple negation (in which more than one grammatically negative element can be used in a single clause)—the pattern common in the dialect she speaks throughout the show—to single negation (in which only one grammatically negative element is used per clause)—the pattern found in "standard" English and in most socially prestigious dialects of U.S. English (Green, 2002: 77–80; Rickford & Rickford, 2000: 123–124). We can assume from these linguistic adjustments that Taystee has been coached to speak in a certain way during the trial—a more "standardized," Whiter way—in order to improve how she is perceived by the mostly White jury. But she obviously struggles to modify the linguistic patterns inherent in her primary dialect, specifically specifically as she recounts emotional details about her childhood and the death of her best friend. Despite her linguistic accommodation efforts in the courtroom, Taystee is found guilty of a crime she did not commit and is sentenced to life in prison.

As viewers, we are not left wondering why the writers used these linguistic "corrections" so prominently in this emotional courtroom scene. We understand perfectly well that the odds are against Taystee, as her credibility, intelligence, and trustworthiness are judged by the jury and others in the courtroom on the basis of how she speaks while on the stand—that is, on how well she is able to shift into the White ways of speaking and being that are connected to social prestige in society. In other words, raciolinguistic bias is a given in the courtroom, and we understand Taystee's efforts to attempt to subvert it, given that her life is at stake.

Unfortunately, these kinds of scenarios do not exist only in fictional contexts. Rickford & King (2016) discuss, among others, the trial of George Zimmerman, in which a key witness, Rachel Jeantel, suffered from extreme judgment on the basis of her speech. During the 2013 trial, Zimmerman (a White/Hispanic police officer) was tried for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin (a Black seventeen-year-old). Jeantel, having been on the phone with Martin just before his death, was an important witness. While she was on the stand, she spoke in her home/native dialect of U.S. English (a variety of African American English that has features in common with the dialect spoken by Taystee, discussed above). Despite being on the stand for nearly six hours, Jeantel's "testimony played no role whatsoever" in the jurors' deliberations, as the jurors had difficulty understanding her speech and found her lacking in credibility overall, undoubtedly due to their racial and linguistic prejudice against her (Rickford & King, 2016: 950). Ultimately, Zimmerman was acquitted.

Linguistic bias is not limited to courtrooms and the justice system. Evidence of linguistic discrimination can be found across all facets of society: education, the housing and job markets, healthcare, and in everyday encounters in grocery stores, banks, parks, and public transportation, among countless other examples. A vast amount of research in linguistics (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Baugh, 2000; Lippi-Green, 2012; McBee Orzulak, 2015; Reaser, Temple Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2017; Smitherman, 2000) has proven that all varieties of a given language are systematic, rule-governed codes, which means that no dialect is inherently better than any other. Yet speakers of certain dialects are afforded social prestige, while others are stigmatized and marginalized on the basis of how they speak, which is connected to factors including their geographical location, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identity categories. Moreover, since no one has a choice regarding what home/native language or dialect they speak—given that all people learn from birth whatever language and dialect are spoken by their families and communities where they are raised—linguistic bias is inherently inequitable, representing a large yet under-acknowledged part of the systems of social injustice that impact people's ways of life in the United States and around the world.

> [T]he hidden curriculum presents a challenge for teachers: to interrogate upon what hidden values and assumptions our pedagogical practices and content are built in order to ensure that we are not tacitly reinforcing the status quo and the systems of inequality that go hand-in-hand with it.

Confronting Linguistic Bias in the Classroom

In my teaching and research, I investigate and work to dismantle linguistic prejudice, linguistic discrimination, and linguistic inequality. By interrogating and revising the "traditional" curricula and pedagogical approaches of the courses I teach, I seek to make students aware of standard language ideology (SLI), which Lippi-Green (2012: 67) defines as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is primarily drawn from the spoken language of the upper middle class." By helping students to understand and acknowledge SLI, I encourage them to question the linguistic hierarchies that have been presented to them as common sense throughout their schooling and to question their allegiance to "standard" English. Furthermore, as

students become aware of their own linguistic prejudice, I encourage them to develop an appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity and, most importantly, challenge them to actively seek out ways to dismantle their own biases, the biases of others in their lives, and the societal structures and institutions that promote the propagation of such biases.

I became aware of the potential for the curricular change I was implementing to actually reinforce the very inequities I was seeking to make apparent and challenge.

One method through which I have attempted to institute such changes in my teaching is the development of a pedagogical approach that I have designed and vigorously researched in the context of my own teaching called the Structural Inquiry of Stigmatized Englishes (SISE) approach (Hercula, 2020). The approach was primarily designed and evaluated within the context of the college-level introductory linguistics course but can be modified for use in other disciplines and courses and at other levels of education. The SISE approach is largely characterized by a change in the types of language data students study—rather than learning the terms and modes of analysis unique to the field by studying "standard" U.S. English language data, they instead apply their new knowledge to language data unique to socially stigmatized varieties of U.S. English, such as African American English (AAE), Chicano English (CE), and/or Appalachian English (AE). Students investigate these dialects structurally, studying the phonological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic features of the dialects. For example, when students are learning about syntax, they study concepts including auxiliary verbs, indefinite nouns, adverbs, and the parts of a clause (subject, predicate, direct object, etc.). They then apply these new concepts when they study the grammatical feature known as *multiple negation* (discussed above), which is a pattern found in the speech of many speakers of AAE, CE, and AE. As they do so, they discover that multiple negation is just as linguistically rule-governed and complex as single negation, its counterpart in "standard" English. By engaging in this type of structural analysis, students are given facts and data they can draw upon later in the course—and later in their lives—when they study the impact of linguistic prejudice, profiling, and discrimination on the lives of speakers of these dialects and others who suffer from the effects of linguistic inequality, such as speakers with certain foreign accents.

The research I have conducted on the SISE approach has shown that the vast majority of students respond well to the curriculum, developing more positive, pluralistic language attitudes by the end of the semester (Hercula, 2020). There is some evidence to suggest that the approach is better received, on the whole, by women and by students of color, as some White men show resistance to the approach—or perhaps more accurately, show resistance to admitting to a shift in their attitudes throughout the course (Hercula, 2020: 163–190). However, many students who have studied linguistics through the SISE approach provide evidence to suggest that the knowledge they gained in the course—and their correspondingly improved attitudes—persist beyond the end of the course, as they are compelled to share what they have learned with others and to find ways to work toward breaking down the structural and institutional practices that would continue benefitting some speakers while disadvantaging others.

Making "Small" Changes to Harness the Hidden Curriculum

What makes the SISE approach unique as compared to other language awareness approaches that have been developed by researchers for use in various disciplines and at various levels (Alim, 2007; Delpit, 2006; Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Siegel, 2006; Wolfram, Temple Adger, & Christian, 1999) is that it requires a relatively "small" change to the curriculum. By *small*, I don't mean *easy to implement* or *ineffective* or *lacking impact*; instead, I mean that the SISE approach represents a minor adjustment to an otherwise unchanged curriculum and set of course objectives. When I teach using the SISE approach, my students learn the same concepts, approaches, methods of analysis, and content that any other student in any other introductory linguistics course is likely to learn. Instead of adding a unit or a text or modifying course outcomes—

finding room for yet more in an already full course—I found a way to integrate a social-justice-oriented approach within the fabric of what the course was already designed to do. I sought to modify not the overt curriculum but the hidden curriculum.

Elliot, *et al.* (2016: 739) define "hidden curriculum" as "the various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students—messages we may not be even aware we are sending." Hidden curricula are embedded within our institutional contexts, disciplines, and courses, tacitly promoting specific assumptions, values, and behaviors that are reinforced without being a stated part of our curricular objectives. Discussions of the hidden curriculum usually revolve around messaging we need to interrogate and dismantle, particularly due to its tendency to reinforce hegemonic practices and structures. For example, Apple (2012: 133) points out that, through the hidden curriculum of K–12 schools, "working-class students are taught punctuality, neatness, respect for authority, and other elements of habit formation. The students of more advanced classes are taught intellectual open-mindedness, problem-solving, flexibility, and so on." As such, the hidden curriculum presents a challenge for teachers: to interrogate upon what hidden values and assumptions our pedagogical practices and content are built in order to ensure that we are not tacitly reinforcing the status quo and the systems of inequality that go hand-in-hand with it. Orón Semper & Blasco (2018: 491) put it this way: "teachers must ask themselves, and discuss with students, in what ways the curriculum they teach represents the dominant ideological interests in the society in question, and how their institution legitimates these forms of knowledge as 'truths.'" Thus, uncovering and making explicit the hidden curriculum is an important practice in which all teachers must engage. However, I argue that recognizing the power of a hidden curriculum can also be an opportunity: we can harness our hidden curricula to send, instead, tacit messages of social justice and equality.

When I was first designing my curriculum for the introductory linguistics course, I realized that, by situating an introduction to the field within the context of standard language (in my case, standard English), the hidden curriculum messaging was SLI: the promotion of standard English above other Englishes and, thus, the promotion of people whose dialects more closely resemble standard English over people who dialects diverge significantly from standard English. This very recognition is what guided my development of the SISE approach—I hypothesized that, by substituting language data from socially stigmatized Englishes in place of standard English, I could send a different tacit message: that these dialects are structurally patterned, legitimate, and worthy of study (and, by extension, that their speakers are also legitimate and valuable).

By subverting the traditional hidden curricula in our fields and courses, we have the opportunity to show students—little-by-little, day-by-day—that diversity is always already present and that working toward equity is a responsibility that should be shared by all.

In line with this example, I propose that teachers can subvert traditional hidden curricula and harness the concept of a hidden curriculum, making "small" changes in order to integrate themes of social justice into their courses. Importantly, this work must be done with great care and must be supported by research-based practices. Martin (1976: 141) implores teachers to "return to the scene of our interventions to make sure we have not done more harm than good. There is no guarantee that, when we change an educational setting so as to do away with a portion of its hidden curriculum we find abhorrent, we will succeed; indeed, if we are not careful, the changes we make can generate the very learning states we are trying to banish or, for that matter, ones even more unsavory." In the case of my development of the SISE approach, through research, I became aware of the potential for the curricular change I was implementing to actually reinforce the very inequities I was seeking to make apparent and challenge. Margolin (2014: 4) explains that "white privilege pedagogy operates in large part as an antiracist cover, a sham that allows whites to have their cake and eat it too by providing

them the appearance of selflessness and antiracism without requiring them to do anything selfless or antiracist." As a way to avoid this potential outcome, I design my courses to include opportunities for students to enact what they are learning, for example, by engaging in a conversation partners program with students whose linguistic backgrounds do not match their own. I also prompt students to share what they have learned with others and to reflect on the outcomes of such conversations (Hercula, 2020). Furthermore, I have dedicated myself to the project of studying my own teaching by engaging in research in the scholarship of teaching and learning, evaluating the outcomes of my curricular interventions systematically. This kind of systematic interrogation and study of our teaching should be a key part of our craft, particularly as we seek to implement social-justice-oriented approaches, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the curricular changes we design and to guide future adjustments.

The Impact of Social-Justice-Oriented Teaching

Ultimately, in making these kinds of changes to our curricular designs and pedagogical practices, the most important question we should consider is whether our changes will promote transfer. Does the social-justice-oriented content we incorporate into our courses stay with our students as they engage in future coursework and, more importantly, as they live their lives and interact with others in non-academic contexts? After all, if our goal is to work toward greater equity for all—by improving the attitudes of each of our students, one-by-one—it is imperative that the lessons they learn in our classes are carried forward to impact their future values, perspectives, and behaviors. Furthermore, we want them to share these lessons with others, promoting the spread of tolerance, an appreciation for diversity, and a drive to work toward equity.

As a part of my research on the effectiveness of the SISE approach, I conducted a longitudinal study on the long-term impact of the SISE approach on my former students. The results of the study show positive trends in terms of students' retention of what they learned and their ongoing commitment to intervening in systems of linguistic inequality (Hercula, 2020: 142–160). Here, I wish to share a more recent example of this long-term impact.

A couple of months ago, as I was in the process of preparing the outline for this article, I received an email from a former student. She had taken three of my courses as a part of her undergraduate degree—one that explicitly utilized the SISE approach—the last of which had ended more than two years before I received her email. She wrote the following (reproduced here with her permission):

> *Hi! I am watching a new Netflix movie, an adaptation of "The Boys in the Band," and literally had to pause it and contact you. Considering that part of the plot is a straight friend showing up to a (closeted to him) gay friend's dinner party, there is plenty of code switching. But I just saw a scene where one of the black characters calls his childhood home. Since this is set in the 70s, it means the house his mother worked in as the "Help." His name is Michael Benjamin* [Washington], *I looked it up because it is the most beautiful, heartbreaking and perfectly executed code switch…It ebbs and flows as he maintains control of his emotions…It is a brilliant piece of acting that represents the *constant* acting Black people must perform in white society.* [ellipses in original]

I was thrilled receive this email—as are all instructors when we see examples of the impact of our teaching. I was particularly excited that the student still remembers some of the concepts we had discussed (e.g. code switching) and that her analysis of the scene is connected not just to the linguistic practices themselves but also to the impact of those practices on the lives of those who enact them. Her final point shows that she has retained an understanding of the "linguistic push-pull" (Smitherman, 2000: 146) certain speakers are forced to contend with in their daily interactions and the unfair burden placed on them to change how they speak—and thus who they are—in order to be perceived positively within the dominant culture. Ultimately, I view this email as an example of the potential positive impact of the integration of themes of social justice into our cours-

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es, as this student shows that linguistic (in)equality and its impact on people of color is still resonating for her during her life beyond college, providing a lens through which she is observing the world around her.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to advocate for carefully designing, implementing, and studying the impact of social-justice-oriented "hidden" curricula within our course designs, particularly those that address linguistic inequality. This practice will look different from discipline to discipline and course to course, but I argue that there is room in all courses and fields at all levels to engage in this kind of work. In second language teaching, for example, an instructor might consider how to incorporate language variation and socially stigmatized dialects as they teach particular forms in the target language. A mathematics teacher might consider the language features of their application problems: are diverse people and scenarios depicted? Literature and history instructors might consider the level of diversity present in the texts they choose for their students to analyze, and moreover, whether their students are aware of contributions to their fields by people who are not White, male, straight, cisgender, or linguistically privileged, for example.

The beauty of this method is that it is "small": it doesn't require adding more into an already packed syllabus or course but, rather, requires creativity in adapting an existing curricular plan in order to integrate social-justice-oriented themes into the background of the content. I invite you to consider how you might implement such an approach in your courses and with your students. First, consider what constitutes the current hidden curriculum in your courses and whose interests it serves. Then, consider how you can harness the power of the hidden curriculum, modifying its presence in order to send tacit messaging that promotes equity and inclusion. By subverting the traditional hidden curricula in our fields and courses, we have the opportunity to show students—little-by-little, day-by-day—that diversity is always already present and that working toward equity is a responsibility that should be shared by all.

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