The paradoxes of oracy education in secondary schools

A case study of Liverpool English

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Abstract

In this article we present initial results of a research project that focuses pedagogical attention on oracy and, specifically, regional varieties of English in the school context. We use as backdrop the co-creation of a series of learning activities on Liverpool English with secondary school teachers in Merseyside. We explore the struggles and conflicts navigated by secondary school English teachers in Liverpool when reviewing the potential to include discussions of Liverpool English in their oracy teaching practices. We call for more inclusive oracy education policies that validate regional varieties of English and contribute to a more empowering educational landscape for all pupils.

Key words: oracy education; 'standard' English; Liverpool English; language ideologies; co-created learning activities; English national curriculum

Introduction

Mindful of the recent interest given to oracy education, and in line with the long-observed benefits of oracy teaching on student confidence, this paper presents the results of a research project that focuses pedagogical attention on local varieties of English in the English school context, using as backdrop the co-creation of a series of learning activities on Liverpool English with secondary school teachers in Merseyside.[1] Sociolinguistic and educational research on oracy emphasises the value of regional accents and dialects in the spoken classroom repertoire. Self-expression in dialect, and talk about talk, strengthen pupils' engagement in classroom activities by allowing them to develop their repertoire as agents of their own speaking and communication.[2] However, the fact that 'standard English' is the variety historically chosen as the vehicle of school instruction impacts on the way in which oracy is conceptualised in school teaching practices, promoting as a result exclusive ways of speaking and expression that marginalise speakers of non-standardised dialects.

This paper explores the *struggles* and *conflicts* navigated by secondary school English teachers in Liverpool when reviewing the potential to include discussions of Liverpool English in their oracy teaching practices. We argue that these struggles are a result of

long-established language ideologies that value highly and exclusively 'standard English' in classroom speaking, and pair 'standard English' with academic attainment. These, in turn, lead to policing non-standardised accents and dialects in the classroom. We call for more inclusive oracy education policies that validate regional varieties of English, in order to penetrate longstanding raciolinguistic ideologies that marginalise dialect speakers, as well as address wider socioeducational inequalities.[3]

Language ideologies and oracy education in English schools

Oracy broadly pertains to the ability to speak and listen, and to use spoken language effectively in a range of contexts, including teaching and learning. Despite the significance of oracy education in boosting student speaking confidence and wider language awareness, the inclusion of oracy teaching in recent iterations of the English national curriculum (henceforth NC) has been minimal.[4] In earlier iterations of the NC, speaking and listening were an integral part of the programmes of study and of the assessment protocols.[5] Even the Department for Education and Employment 1999 revision emphasised the role of speaking and listening as vital components of literacy. However, the most recent NC reforms (2013-14) devalued the importance of oracy in school pedagogical practices. Specifically, while the non-statutory guidance continued to highlight the need to develop spoken language skills in the classroom, it demoted the importance of oracy in comparison to other literacy skills, with the programmes of study suggesting that '[s]poken language is key because it "continues to *underpin* the development of pupils' reading and writing during key stage 4"'.[6] (Emphasis added.)

These latest reforms of the NC led to a belated 'awakening' of oracy policies, with concerns emerging in the late 2010s. An Oracy Commission was established in 2019 by the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in partnership with the education charity Voice 21. The commission's main objective was to investigate the state of oracy education in England, gathering evidence on the benefits of spoken language skills and providing recommendations for reintegrating oracy into the curriculum. The result of this work was the *Speak for Change* report, which called for a curricular reform to ensure oracy plays a central role in pupils' literacy development.[7] Voice 21 was also centrally involved in the development of a new independent commission, *The Future of Oracy Education in England*, whose report criticises the current inconsistency in oracy education across schools and proposes that oracy should be recognised as the 'fourth R', alongside reading, writing and arithmetic.[8] The report also stresses that oracy at school should appreciate different communication styles and local accents and varieties of English (pp18-19), and should not disadvantage students based on their linguistic backgrounds (pp 44-45). This is grounded in the argument that oracy skills help students develop confidence, critical thinking and the ability to engage in civil discourse, thus being essential components for social inclusion and future employability. What is more, research has shown that talk-intensive pedagogies are key to social mobility, addressing, thus, wider educational inequalities.[9]

Oracy education therefore involves the need to value everyone's voice and the expression of self in different regional varieties, including non-standardised dialect. However, the high value that is placed on standardised English in the English NC, and the pressures of macro-level educational policies in English schools, lead to myths and unevidenced assumptions that talking in non-standardised dialect has direct consequences on writing. These are grounded in – and, in turn, forge and sustain – raciolinguistic ideologies, whereby speakers are recognised as cultural beings through the ways they are acoustically understood by white privileged (in terms of class, region nation and race) listening subjects.[10] In turn, these ideologies lead to meso-level policies enforced by the schools that police non-standardised forms of talk in the classroom.[11] As a result, teachers find themselves reproducing ideologies of linguistic appropriateness and correctness in their classroom practices, whereby 'correct' and 'proper' speaking is equated to speaking in standardised English.

Our previous work with grammar schools in Merseyside has shown that when it comes to UK dialects that are highly recognisable, such as Liverpool English, there is an explicit hierarchical order that reflects a value system that guides teachers and students alike in their pedagogical and learning practices.[12] This system positively values the exclusive and consistent use of standardised English, even in spoken classroom practices. Any use of Liverpool English is seen as a deviation from a presumed normative order. As such, Liverpool English is *just about* tolerated or rejected altogether by grammar school students and teachers, for the mere reason that it does not align with academic attainment or wider academic aspirations. In fact, it is treated as a threat to academic success. This practice has also been described as the 'middle class bias' that is normalised in English educational contexts.[13]

Our project: attending to Liverpool English – enhancing teaching practices and empowering students

As described in the sections above, the current education landscape witnesses the operation of two contradictory facts. On one hand, a recent rise in oracy education and the recognition of the need to implement more oracy-based policies that will include embracing non-standardised language practices in the classroom. On the other hand, a continuing rigid value system that polices non-standardised speech on the grounds that it hinders academic attainment. Against this backdrop, this paper introduces preliminary results of our research project (AHRC IAA 182945) that led to the development of a set of key stage 3 (for pupils aged 11-14) learning activities that centre the pedagogical attention on Liverpool English. The aim is to deposit these activities as an open educational resource (OER) which will become available and reusable by teachers in the Merseyside region (and beyond). The activities include, among others: ways to introduce students to language variation; a discussion of the origins of language variation and speakers' attitudes to them; a discussion and reflection of the

representation of Liverpool English in consumer goods; and an in-class discussion of attitudes towards one's own accent/ dialect (see indicative materials in Table 1).

These activities were co-created with six teachers from five secondary schools in Liverpool. The co-creation process involved the research team in drafting a series of pilot activities which were then evaluated by the six participating teachers during a

Table 1: **Learning activities on accent, dialect and Liverpool English**

Unit title	**Classroom activities**	**Main Voice21 Oracy Framework Skills targeted**
Language variety	Small group discussion of what accents the students hear in different contexts. Watching videos of sandwich-making instructions, delivered in different registers, accents and dialects. Paired activity of writing their own instructions for making a sandwich in a home (with a family member) and a professional context (restaurant), and class discussion of choices (dialect/accent/register).	Linguistic, Cognitive
Where do accents come from?	Small group discussion of the origins and variation of accents and speakers' attitudes to them. Watching a comic video of a foreign speaker learning Liverpool English and class discussion on attitudes towards accent and accent change. Paired activity of matching linguistic facts to accent history.	Linguistic, Social & Emotional
Contrastive teaching	Class discussion of linguistic enregisterment (representation of Liverpool English in consumer goods). Paired activity of identifying grammatical/phonetic features of Liverpool English.	Linguistic, Social & Emotional
How we feel about our accents	Reading and listening to examples of people reflecting on their Liverpool accent. Class discussion of attitudes towards one's own accent/dialect. Writing a history of the student's own accent/ dialect which includes selfreflection on processes of linguistic accommodation, language change and identity.	Cognitive, Social & Emotional

90-minute online focus group (in July 2024); the evaluation was on the basis of (a) their topical relevance, (b) benefit to teaching practice and student confidence-raising, as well as (c) usability within the national curriculum context and their respective school frameworks/schemes of work. Our rationale for including regional dialects in spoken language lessons was research-driven; failure to recognise non-standardised dialects as

resources can impede students' learning, and attending to them can increase language awareness and boost critical language skills.[14] As such it aligns with oracy-based initiatives that draw attention to regional speech, and attempts to penetrate this rigid value system which treats standardised forms of speaking as highly valued and non-standardised forms as lesser.

The activity-reviewing part of the focus group organically developed into a general conversation which gave the six participant teachers the opportunity to reflect on the presence of accents and dialects in the school context, as well as to discuss their own oracy teaching practice. We facilitated the group by asking six pre-prepared, open-ended questions concerning the part played by spoken English, and specifically regional accents and dialects, in English lessons at the participants' respective schools. All of the participants responded to the questions, and to each other's comments. We recorded the discussion through Zoom and produced an initial transcription. Over several successive re-readings, we labelled different sections of the data according to the explicit content, implicit ideas and functions of what was said. We then grouped these labels or 'codes' into a smaller number of overarching themes. We adopted a 'critical realist position', meaning that we assumed any comments made – by us or the participants – were context-dependent, with an indirect relationship to real underlying conditions.[15]

The sections below illustrate our analysis of how teachers navigate their struggle between the macro/meso-level ideologies and associated policies, and their microlevel/local classroom needs and practices when it comes to the potential of teaching Liverpool English within an oracy-based pedagogical approach.

Analysis

Participants' comments were characterised, throughout, by the following conflict: recognising the benefit to students of regional dialect teaching; navigating the constraints of a national curriculum which has no regional dialect content; and feeling ideologically ambivalent towards teaching regional dialect alongside 'standard English', as equivalent linguistic resources.

The 'power' of dialect speaking and the constraints of dialect teaching

In general, the participants recognised the benefits to students of incorporating regional dialects in their teaching. One of the more experienced teachers recollected how before 2014 'that was a key part, key stage, you would definitely do a whole unit on accent and dialect. And it'd be really interesting. And students really liked it, really enjoyed it' (Participant Three). Two others remarked that there was 'power' in students using material that reflected their own way of speaking (Participants Two and Four). Later in the discussion, we suggested teaching 'standard English' and Liverpool English in parallel, providing some sample materials we had drafted as an example. Teaching two dialects side-by-side is a technique that has been shown to improve students'

metalinguistic awareness of both dialects, while maintaining confidence in the students' own regional identities.[16] All six participants provided enthusiastic feedback on how the drafts could be modified for use in their own classrooms, with one emphasising that the content would meet a need for students who experience negative judgements of their dialect: 'I think we need to teach them to be proud of where they're from and their accent' (Participant Six).

Despite such enthusiasm, at the time of the focus group none of the participants included regional dialects in their spoken language lessons, and the possibility of changing practice was repeatedly qualified with comments on priorities. A narrow approach to dialect teaching was partly determined by national criteria. One teacher commented: 'So I think in terms of covering accents throughout curriculum doesn't take place for a few like really specific reasons. The first one I can think of is, well, the national curriculum. There is none of it. So why would anyone put it in there?' (Participant One). Even areas of English teaching that fell within the national curriculum's scope were sidelined if there was no formal requirement for assessment. Prioritisation of content was described as 'results-driven' (Participants One and Six) with little room in a 'packed' curriculum (Participant Three) to address topics that would not be directly tested.

Within this inflexible framework, participants gave accounts of their being able to discuss non-standardised dialects only partially and reactively, in the following contexts. The first was during study of literary texts, such as Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* (Participants Two, Three and Five) and John Agard's *Checking Out Me History* (Participants One, Two, Three and Six), which make creative use of dialect in written, potentially performed, English. The second context was participants' ad hoc reactions to students' own use of regional dialect, which we discuss in more detail below. Short of a change at national level, the participants faced a difficult task to address language variation more fully and intentionally in their classrooms. Participant Three commented that an additional complicating factor may be the length of time regional dialects have been absent from the national curriculum. As the only participant with teaching experience predating then education secretary Michael Gove's curriculum reforms, she suggested more recently qualified teachers were less confident discussing regional dialects. Professional memory informs how teachers reimagine and redefine the object of English teaching.[17] Given the previously discussed disincentives for including regional dialect in school priorities at all (at macro and meso-levels), the motivation of individual teachers, and their personal levels of confidence in a given topic (at the micro-level), may be additionally important as factors influencing whether regional dialect is attended to in pedagogical practices.

The ideological 'struggle'

Although the participants explicitly discussed the national curriculum as a practical constraint on the available resource for dialect teaching, we observed that, underlying

their comments, was an ideological tension in attitudes towards standardised forms of speaking and to regional dialects as equivalent linguistic resources. In line with the national curriculum's privileging of 'standard English', participants occasionally advocated preferentially for 'standard English' teaching, even though this was seemingly incompatible with their observations of how language variation relates to 'power' and 'pride'. Participants' accurate appraisal that students with regional dialects could face prejudice in a variety of situations, such as Oxbridge applications (Participant Three) or jobs involving contact with 'standard English' speakers (Participant Six) was given as a rationale for encouraging students to adopt 'standard English'. To reconcile this tension, participants attempted to recast the dialect hierarchy as a distinction between formal and informal registers:

> I think what can let our students down is code switching and not knowing when it's appropriate to use sort of regional dialect words, not knowing what the standard – nearly said correct! – what the standard English terms might be, that sometimes can be an issue. *Participant Three*
>
> I think we need to tell them, they should be proud of their accent. But they need to realise there's a distinction between how they talk at home with their families and their friends, which is absolutely fine, they should be proud of it. But the truth is, when they go to work, many people will judge them if they're not using correct standard English, and there is still correct standard English. *Participant Six*

A significant problem in conflating dialect with register is it leaves the hierarchy fundamentally intact. Students with regional dialects continue to be positioned as lacking adequate language, which the school, in a purportedly compensatory role, brings into compliance with classed notions of 'correct' English. By making standardised English the precondition for social justice, the above strategy furthers disparities and differential treatment on class grounds in English lessons.[18]

Teachers as gatekeepers of 'standard English'

The above strategy also places teachers in an oppositional role to students. For participants, this seemingly created a situation where they retained the attitude that modifying regional dialects was in the students' interest, but to say so openly risked causing 'offence' or 'offending' students (Participants Two and Five) who 'love their Liverpool accents and the way that they speak' (Participant Five). One teacher implicitly demonstrated that students' resistance to 'standard English' is an occasion for ideological conflict; for example, here a student's correct inference that their dialect is treated as inferior is reduced to personal sensitivity:

> I think accents are an extension of identity as I've gone back to earlier, and I think teachers, leaders, curriculum designers, and perhaps even parents, are afraid of upsetting people and the applecart. So like what [Participant Six] was just saying then

about, you need to turn your accent down. That's, you know, some people will take that really personally, and, 'What are you saying I'm not good enough for this?', and we don't want to be, you know, RADA in the 1930s, which is, you know, 'we have a way of speaking that is right'. I think that's regressive. But also there is a balance, isn't there? *Participant One*

Throughout the discussion, participants positioned regional dialects as a sensitive, politically charged topic and a 'struggle' (Participant Five) to navigate. This was implicit in the caution participants showed us and each other through qualifying phrases such as 'hope I haven't upset anyone with those comments' (Participant Three). It was not clear, however, that this inhibited their policing of students' language in practice, as participants did give multiple examples of responding to regional accents and dialect by 'correction of children who do speak in a Scouse accent' (Participant Two), 'making them aware that maybe that's not the – well, it's not the right way that we say it' (Participant Four), and reflecting that 'when we correct them it can be quite challenging' (Participant Five).

Notably, the inclination to 'correct' regional dialect encompassed the teachers' own language use. Participant Four referred to policing her own spoken use of Liverpool dialect in the perceived interest of students' writing skills: 'we need to maybe be more conscious and more conscious when we're speaking to students, which I suppose I know I am; I am when I speak to them'. This comment constructs the teachers as a role model for students, reinforcing the idea of linguistic appropriateness that coincides with the 'reduction' of dialect forms.[19] Another participant commented on language use by staff members at her school, although it was unclear whether she had shared her perspective with them directly:

I certainly find it quite frustrating when I hear staff in assemblies, or, you know, in a sort of more formal situation, where they do use the dialect terms, and I know why they do it, you know, to make sort of children feel that, you know, we're all part of one big family. I get that. But I think that distinction needs to be made in a particularly as

I say, when you've got a region with … a strong accent. *Participant Three*

The evidence of internalised pressure to police one's own dialect, and of frustration at professional peers' language use, is consistent with earlier research that teacher training courses encourage accent modification to varieties they deem 'professional'.[20] It also supports Snell and Cushing's argument that teachers internalise harmful institutional expectations of modelling 'correct' speech and, as a result, construct themselves as role models who should act as gatekeepers of 'standard English'.[21] These expectations are part of language policing strategies predominantly reinforced by Ofsted, who dictate that correct forms of speech are those used by white privileged members of society, including the inspectorate themselves.[22] This results in the

marginalisation of the voices of the non-privileged low income and racialised communities, including students and teachers.

Conclusions

Educational (socio)linguists have long advocated the need to attend to regional language in school teaching practices. This has proven to be multiply beneficial to students and teachers alike, as it increases language awareness, boosts oracy skills and speaking confidence, and enhances dialogic participation in classroom discussion. Despite a recent increase in oracy awareness among teaching circles, we evidence the pervasiveness of macro-level language ideologies of correctness and appropriateness that have been historically entrenched in British social inequalities. Our focus group data has shown that these ideologies were reproduced and internalised by our participants who, despite embracing the value of dialect speaking in their metalinguistic commentary, positioned themselves as gatekeepers of 'standard English' in their meso-level school schemes of work, as well as their micro-level teaching practices.

This contradiction has a significant impact on the practical considerations when it comes to implementing oracy teaching in Liverpool school classrooms. Teachers are, in principle, willing to foster dialogic discussion and self-expression in Liverpool English. They are, however, ideologically held back from implementing oracy policies in their classrooms. Although they attribute this to the constraints of the assessment system (a lack of assessment of oracy at GCSE level), our data indicates that a contributing factor to their dismissal of Liverpool English as a valid medium of oracy instruction is their perceived boundaries between what they deem as 'standard'/'correct' forms of talk and 'Liverpool English'. As a result, acknowledging the importance of oracy is 'good enough' for our participants as they aim to 'do the right thing' for their students, but going one step further and making significant change in terms of how regional dialects are managed in their pedagogical practices seems to be a path they struggle to follow. In turn, the students may be deprived of their freedom of expression as agents of their own speaking, despite – as teacher acknowledged – the 'power' which dialect speaking entails. Students are therefore positioned paradoxically: agents of their powerful linguistic repertoires in theory, but passive carriers of 'standard English' in practice.

To eliminate the contradiction, we argue that more inclusive policies are needed at the macro-level (such as government, the charity sector and teacher education bodies/institutions) to implement oracy education in teaching *and* assessment in the English school curriculum. Such (re)introduction of oracy should explicitly include and address – not merely acknowledge – the value of localised accents and dialects as resources that give students the social advantage of being flexible language users. Such knowledge will genuinely empower dialect speakers and will enable them to become successful citizens who can control their lives through speech, as the national curriculum dictates. It will also contribute to challenging the deeply entrenched class-based ideological

predispositions towards the high value of standardised English and, genuinely, begin to erase the socioeducational inequalities that such historical associations have produced at the oracy/spoken level. We therefore argue that to respond to the needs of a levelling-up agenda, policymakers must collaborate more with local educational communities. This requires moving beyond traditional, top-down methods of policy development and engaging in participatory work where all stakeholders (policymakers as well as practitioners, teacher-educators and students), collaborate to shape language education. This type of collaborative effort will not only foster a sense of shared responsibility in both preserving and promoting linguistic diversity, but also create a way to establish a more equitable and empowering educational landscape for all pupils.

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