

# “Wow! Linguistics really has no pedagogy!”

## A review of what (little) we know about teaching linguistics

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What do we know about teaching practices and outcomes in linguistics courses?

What do we still need to find out?

### What do we know about linguistics pedagogy?

The title of this poster comes from an email exchange I had with a friend about pedagogical research in our disciplines. After a few back-and-forths, she wrote:

*Wow! Linguistics really has no pedagogy!*

This isn't true, of course, but it is true that there's been very little research done on the teaching of linguistics compared to some fields (like, for example, composition or math), or even very closely related fields (such as second language learning). This, then, is a first attempt at developing a bibliography of work that has been done in linguistics pedagogy, to provide a foundation for further work.

### Teaching linguistics as dialect studies

Of the relatively little that has been written on linguistics pedagogy, a fairly large proportion has advocated the use of dialect studies to teach linguistics. This generally takes one of two approaches: having students observe dialect differences around them (or at least observe a single dialect, possibly their own) and use those observations to form generalizations about language, or using preexisting analyses of dialects as a gateway into making linguistic claims and generalizations. Most often, it seems, those who favor this approach also advocate using a dialectological approach to undermine any values students might have that hold standard language to be good and nonstandard language (i.e., what they likely think of as dialects) to be bad.

The major advantage of this approach is that dialect variation is constantly around all of our students. Investigating it deeply also requires students to question some of their attitudes toward dialects and dialect speakers (even if they don't end up changing their minds). However, there are troubling limits to what can actually be covered in a course that limits itself to this approach.

Articles in the bibliography that discuss (and, universally, advocate) this approach: Adams 2002\*; Bailey 2002\*; Curzan 2002\*; Danesi 1974; Kretzschmar 2002\*; Lanehart 2002\* (in part); Spring, Flynn, Joseph, Moses, Steele, & Webb 2000 (in part).

It is worth noting that the large proportion of research on this approach to linguistic pedagogy is largely the result of a single issue of the *Journal of English Linguistics* that was largely devoted to this topic. Articles from this collection are marked with an asterisk in the list above.

### A few problems for linguistics pedagogy

- ⊙Linguistics doesn't fully fit humanities or sciences models
- ⊙Pedagogical techniques often assume one or the other
- ⊙Results in difficulty in managing students' expectations
- ⊙Similar issues exist across the social sciences
- ⊙Linguists use ordinary terms in odd (to students) ways
- ⊙Grammatical has nothing to do with usage conventions
- ⊙Conservative has no sociopolitical connotations
- ⊙Linguists make unusual claims about the object of study
- ⊙No language or dialect is more primitive than another
- ⊙One linguistic form cannot be better than another
- ⊙Language change is natural

### Teaching linguistics as anthropology

Linguists, even those who focus on purely theoretical aspects of the field, all recognize that language is inherently a part of human culture—that is, something that can be looked at through the lens of anthropology. Therefore, even some linguists who don't themselves focus on the anthropological aspects of language in their own research use teaching methods that bring cultural issues to the forefront.

There are two main strands of pedagogical research involving this approach: discussions of issues relating to training linguistics students to be aware of cultural issues, and linguistic simulations for classroom use. There is also what might be called a sub-genre focusing on one particular bit of (false) cultural conventional wisdom: the idea that “the Eskimo language” has more words for snow than other languages such as English.

The major advantage to this approach is that cultural differences tend to be fairly simple for students to spot (even if they are not always interpreted accurately). However, there is the very real danger (which has been noted by some research into anthropological research more generally, as well) that, if not handled very carefully, this sort of approach can solidify students' preexisting false notions about cultures and cultural groups, rather than correct them.

Articles in the bibliography that focus on language as an anthropological issue: Blohm, Hartley, & Lapinsky 1995; Fantini 1995; Macaulay 2004; Martin 1986; Pullum 1996; Steele 2003.

### What this means for linguistics

There has clearly been some effort to find ways to make undergraduate linguistics courses more compelling, interesting, and immediate for students. Compared to many other fields, however, relatively little has been done, and nearly none of the work that has been done has involved actively measuring the results of various pedagogical efforts—that is, there are a lot of probably good ideas floating around out there, but very little has been done to determine exactly how good they really are.

In short, what it means for linguistics is that we in our field still have a lot to learn about helping others learn our field.

### What now?

This poster outlines what we know about linguistics pedagogy—and notably, while we know a lot about approaches that various individuals have used, we still have relatively little information on the *degree* to which any specific methods have been successful or unsuccessful. Therefore, over the next year I will be conducting a study (which has already received Institutional Review Board approval) to quantitatively investigate the pedagogical effects of different teaching methods in linguistics courses—and this will allow us to begin to move the study of linguistics pedagogy from a mostly narrative sort of enterprise to a more analytical approach.

### The roots of the problem

Linguistics programs have a short tradition in the United States (the first program fully dedicated to linguistics in the country was founded in 1948 at the University of Pennsylvania). Further, linguistics teaching has been largely focused on graduate-level research until very recently, and there remain fewer undergraduate major linguistics programs than graduate-level ones. (Most graduate students in linguistics have undergraduate degrees in other fields, in fact.) Due to this standing focus on graduate seminar-style training, little attention has been paid to finding the best practices for the teaching of linguistics, especially when it comes to undergraduate linguistics instruction.

### Teaching linguistics as linguistics

There are some aspects of linguistics that do not lend themselves well to an approach centered on dialects or cultures—for example, teaching about issues of quantifier scope or the internal structure of noun phrases relies on methodical analysis of a sort that can't reliably be fed by data from students' observations.

Unfortunately, probably due to the lack of a preexisting base of research into linguistics pedagogy, most of the research that has looked at the teaching of linguistics without a “hook” like dialects or culture has simply pointed to problems, whether at the fairly small level of examples that are used in linguistics textbooks or the larger level of the somewhat amorphous nature of what counts as necessary information for a linguistics student to be presented with.

However, this part of the literature is useful in several ways. First of all, it often works to call attention to the fact that linguistics is not an isolated enterprise and that, despite the opinions of some notable theoreticians, the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the field means that it cannot be taught completely separately from related fields. Crucially, this means that the audience for linguistics instruction goes beyond linguists in training, and we need to keep this in mind.

Articles in the bibliography that focus on linguistics pedagogy in general: Lanehart 2002 (in part); Macaulay & Brice 1997; Petray 2004; Pethő 2004; Pullum 1984; Spring, Flynn, Joseph, Moses, Steele, & Webb 2000 (in part).

### What this means more broadly

Linguistics is not alone in facing some of the challenges confronting its teachers—really, many of those teaching in the social sciences face precisely the same issues in every class. So, even though linguistic anthropology and the sociology of language and psycholinguistics are relatively small subfields of anthropology and sociology and psychology, advances in the teaching of linguistics could presumably be generalized to improve the teaching of those broader fields, as well—and this would work in the other direction, of course. Therefore, we need to develop channels of communication across the social science disciplines to allow cross-fertilization in our pedagogical methods.

### A complete linguistics pedagogy bibliography

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Handouts