



NCTE Speaks Out on Arizona Department of Education Ruling on Teacher Speech

Evaluate Teachers on Their Competence, Not on Their Accents

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The effects of a new Arizona Department of Education policy are reverberating in the literacy education community. According to numerous reports, the Department has told school districts that teachers whose spoken English it deems to be heavily accented or ungrammatical must be removed from classes for students still learning English.

This edict is dangerously misguided. Confirmed by research and by policy positions adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English, what matters most in teaching non-native English language learners is not elocution or adherence to a single dialect or speech pattern. What matters most is understanding students and the dynamics of language learning.

Teachers who have deep roots in the culture and linguistic experiences of their students are well equipped for success in teaching English, regardless of their spoken dialect or accent. A recent NCTE position paper on "[The Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners \(ELLs\)](#)" emphasizes the importance of empathy, connections to ELL students' families and culture, and innovative teaching methods:

Knowledge of the students is key to good teaching. Because teachers relate to students both as learners and as children or adolescents, teachers must establish how they will address two types of relationships, what they need to know about their students, and how they will acquire this knowledge. The teacher-learner relationship implies involvement between teachers and students around subject matter and language and literacy proficiency in both languages. Adult-child relationships are more personal and should include the family. Focusing on both types of relationships bridges the gap between school and the world outside it, a gap that is especially important for many bilingual students whose world differs greatly from school.

The NCTE position paper further asserts that all teachers of ELL students in all content-area subjects must provide effective instruction for students developing academic proficiency in English by:

- *Recognizing that second language acquisition is a gradual developmental process and is built on students' knowledge and skill in their native language;*
- *Providing authentic opportunities to use language in a nonthreatening environment;*
- *Teaching key vocabulary connected with the topic of the lesson;*
- *Teaching academic oral language in the context of various content areas;*
- *Teaching text- and sentence-level grammar in context to help students understand the structure and style of the English language;*
- *Teaching the specific features of language students need to communicate in social as well as academic contexts.*

Teaching English language learners well is difficult. The urgent need for more highly-adept teachers to meet the demand makes the Arizona ban so invidious: teachers who may best understand the cultural and family dynamics of their ELL students, who are living the gradual developmental process that characterizes second language acquisition, are barred from the classrooms where they are needed most.

We would have a different problem had the Arizona guideline directed re-assignment of teachers of ELL students

- who are unsuccessful at teaching academic oral content in math, science, social studies, or the arts;
- who fail to teach key vocabulary or grammar in the context of helping students understand English for school or other purposes;
- who are unable to provide authentic challenges for applying language to solve problems in the lives of students or their families.

There would still be fewer ELL teachers in Arizona classrooms, but those missing wouldn't be identified by their accents. We would be focusing on the real problem: competence.

If the Arizona Department of Education wants to upgrade the quality of instruction for English language learners, it could heed the need for professional knowledge among all teachers about how to serve ELL students. Based on research, NCTE's policy states that:

The majority of ELLs are in mainstream classrooms taught by teachers with little or no formal professional development in teaching ELL students (Barron & Menken, 2002; Kindler, 2002). Many teachers are not adequately prepared to work with a linguistically diverse student population (American Federation of Teachers, 2004; Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Menken & Antunez, 2001; Nieto, 2003).

NCTE encourages English teachers to collaborate and work closely with ESL and bilingual teaching professionals who can offer classroom support, instructional advice, and general insights into second language acquisition. School administrators should support and encourage teachers to attend workshops and professional conferences on bilingual learners, particularly in the areas of reading and writing.

It's time to put sound educational principles ahead of misguided cultural assumptions. We have real work to do unlocking the miraculous potential of a generation of ELL students. Let's use what educators know about language learning to make decisions about fostering the literacy skills of all students.

The National Council of Teachers of English, with 50,000 individual and institutional members worldwide, is dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education. For more information, please visit <http://www.ncte.org>.

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