FORUMS WITH EXPERTS AS A WAY TO TEACH SOCIOLINGUISTICS ONLINE

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Online courses are becoming increasingly popular at American institutions of higher education. According to Allen and Seaman (2008, 5), over 3.94 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in fall 2007, an increase of 12.9% over fall 2006. Although online courses in linguistics were not surveyed specifically, of the eight major discipline areas that were examined, including liberal arts and sciences and humanities, all but one had roughly equal online representation (3).[1] Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, has embraced online learning as a means of improving student access to university courses. The Linguistics Department currently offers four online courses, all in applied linguistics.[2] One of these courses is a graduate introductory class in sociolinguistics, for which I (the first author) created the learning activity described here. In this article, I describe the structure of the online forums with experts held in my course and the benefits of these forums for students taking a sociolinguistics course online.

Van Herk (2008) advocates use of "The Very Big Class Project" to give sociolinguistics students a chance to participate in authentic research early in their studies. While primary research would be useful in an online class as well, since my course has only two credits rather than four and only half the workload of a regular course in sociolinguistics, a project such as Van Herk's could not be implemented effectively. Since the assignments in the course need to be kept relatively short, I opted for a different kind of learning activity: asking students to pose questions to language experts in asynchronous online forums.[3]

Sturgis (1983) designed a successful learning activity that is similar to my online forums with experts. His "conversations with theorists" were carried out in a required senior-level sociology class. Students talked with theorists over the telephone via conference calls. The conversations aimed to improve students' understanding of sociological theory and to make sociological theory more vibrant and interesting. Sturgis notes that the conversations were beneficial for advanced students who already had an understanding of sociological theory; he did not recommend them for beginning students. In contrast, I believe that online forums with experts are appropriate for students at any level as long as they are required to read an article that discusses the forum theme.

TEACHING GOALS. In teaching linguistics, I have found that students are usually keen to ask questions, offer opinions, and write about issues based on their own experience but that they are much less proficient in linking their ideas with concepts and issues from the class readings, a basic component of successful academic work. Thus, one of my goals for the course was to give students a chance to practice posing informed questions about sociolinguistics that were tied to the class readings. I also wanted students to relate concepts from the readings to their experience or interests to make their questions more meaningful to them personally—students would learn more by personalizing their understanding of the forum themes.

Second, I wanted to give the students a chance to learn about particular themes in sociolinguistics by exploring them with experts who have more expertise in those areas than I could offer. I also wanted to test the possibility of inviting not just linguists to be forum experts but also an instructor of a foreign language, literature, and culture, who could provide perspective on language use in a foreign culture.

Third, I wanted to give students a chance to learn from one another's questions and the experts' responses. Beetham (2007) observes that beginning learners prefer dialogue with peer learners, and peer learning is also promoted as a crucial component of online learning (Hiltz and Goldman 2005). I expected that students would have a variety of questions for the experts based on their individual backgrounds and interpretations of the class readings and that they would broaden their understanding of the forum themes by reflecting on other class members' questions and the experts' responses.

THE ACTIVITY. The online forums were organized into three parts. First, students read the relevant chapters in the textbooks for the course, Trudgill (2000) and Bauer and Trudgill (1998), and answered a series of content questions in an essay that provided background information for the forum and the module theme. Next, they submitted their questions, which I forwarded to the expert. Once I received the expert's replies, I posted the questions and replies in an online forum. Finally, students provided reflections on the forum as part of their wrap-up essays for the module.

All of the students in the course were current or former K–12 teachers who plan to continue teaching in the public school system. The themes I selected for the online forums dealt with general issues they encounter frequently in their work as teachers: (1) language ideology and language planning, (2) African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and pidgins and creoles, and (3) address terms and the *tu/vous* (T/V) system in French. The experts invited for the forums were, respectively, Brian Joseph and Don

Winford of Ohio State University's Department of Linguistics and Dikka Berven of Oakland University's Department of Modern Languages and Literatures.

FORMAT FOR STUDENT QUESTIONS. The questions students submitted for the online forums were actually short essays consisting of three parts: (1) a summary of a concept or issue from one of the readings for the forum, (2) a description of how the issue relates to the student's experience or interests, and (3) the actual question. This question format offered several benefits. It enabled the experts to see what issue or concept the students were referring to from the reading and whether they had an accurate understanding of it. It also gave the experts an idea of why students are posing particular questions, that is, where they are "coming from" with their questions. Students were asked to comprehend, reflect on, and summarize one or more ideas from the readings and formulate thoughtful, informed questions, rather than simply pose a question "off the top of their head."

WHY NOT SYNCHRONOUS CHATS INSTEAD? I decided against using synchronous chats for this learning activity for several reasons. Most importantly, the dates of synchronous chats for online courses at Oakland University must be published in the university's schedule of classes, which is prepared months before the course is taught, and only three sessions can be scheduled. It would have been difficult to pin down the experts' schedules far enough in advance to meet this requirement. Second, some experts prefer the asynchronous format because it gives them more time to reflect on student questions and to formulate and edit their answers.[4] The extra time may be especially helpful if the experts are asked to answer questions about a topic with which they are unfamiliar or one that is controversial. Third, I wanted to structure the activity so that every student had an opportunity to ask the expert a question. A lengthy synchronous discussion may have been needed to ensure that all 15 students' questions were asked and answered. Last, I considered the experts' and students' familiarity with online learning technologies. I could have held synchronous chats in Elluminate or via Skype in a university classroom. Either of these options would have required the experts to take the time to learn the mechanics of the relevant Web conferencing application in addition to taking the time to interact with the students. It would have been time-consuming and inconvenient for the experts to do so just for my class activity and could easily have deterred them from participating in the forums, especially since I was unable to offer them an honorarium for their time. Holding synchronous discussions in Elluminate would have also required teaching the students to use the application since many of them were taking my course as their first online course. Holding the discussions via

Skype would have posed a challenge as well—a classroom would have needed to have been reserved far in advance of the event since the university has a classroom shortage. In summary, I recommend using asynchronous forums because they are simpler to plan and carry out than synchronous chats.

ASYNCHRONOUS FORUMS: SACRIFICES AND GAINS. The asynchronous format also had several limitations. Each student could submit only one set of questions for each forum and received only one response from each expert, due to constraints on the experts' and students' time in this two-credit course. Students had no opportunity to ask follow-up questions or to seek clarification, and the experts had no opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their replies or to provide additional information. The asynchronous format also lacked the spontaneity and liveliness of a face-to-face discussion. Only questions that were submitted were answered, and no additional issues that either the experts or the students might have thought of during the course of a face-to-face meeting were discussed.

That said, planning this learning activity as a series of asynchronous forums proved to be the most efficient arrangement. The dates of the forums did not need to be published in the course catalog, a classroom did not need to be reserved, and the experts and students did not need to learn to use a new software application to participate in the activity. Most importantly, asynchronous forums helped us to achieve my teaching goals, as outlined above.

CONTRIBUTION TO LINGUISTICS PEDAGOGY. Online forums with experts are an innovative contribution to linguistics pedagogy. The idea of involving students taking advanced linguistics courses in a conversation with an expert is not particularly new, as graduate students of linguistics can attest, but it appears that few linguists invite experts to engage with students in introductory courses. The online forums in my class challenged beginning students to apply their knowledge of a topic they had learned about in class by having an academic discussion about it with an expert. Second, since online linguistics courses are still a new phenomenon, instructors are continually seeking ways to teach linguistics without the benefit of face-to-face interaction. Online forums with experts are one way to include Web-based interaction in online sociolinguistics courses without the logistical challenges of a synchronous chat. The forums also provide a change of pace in online courses, which may help to keep students interested in the course material. Finally, the forums give students a chance to benefit from the breadth of expertise and perspectives of members of the linguistics community other than the instructor of the course.

I do want to point out, however, that online forums with experts may be more appropriate for courses in sociolinguistics than for courses in more sharply analytic areas, such as syntax or phonology. Brian Joseph notes that students have some intuitive sense about sociolinguistic issues, that is, ones that can be tapped with the right assignments, in ways that they do not about syntax or phonology (Spring et al. 2000). He points out that students "live" sociolinguistics in ways that they do not live syntax or phonology; having used their native language interactively for many years, students in sociolinguistics courses may tap into their sociolinguistic awareness. Online forums with sociolinguistics experts draw on students' intuitive views in ways that may be more difficult to achieve in other courses.

REFLECTIONS ON THE FORUMS. After conducting the online forums, I noticed that students sometimes ask experts politically sensitive questions that may be difficult to answer. The following question was addressed to Brian Joseph in the forum on language planning.

> STUDENT: Trudgill [2000] states that "where language is a defining characteristic of a minority ethnic group wanting independence … linguistic factors are likely to play an important role in any separatist movement they might undertake" (127). I love that our country is a melting pot of cultures, but people from more and more cultures who immigrate to the United States seem to want to remain Spanish or Turkish or Chinese.… Does teaching a child in their native language early in their education lead to that child's becoming more at one with being an American, or does it lead to that child's living here but not wanting to be American?
>
> JOSEPH: My understanding is that from a cognitive perspective, bringing a child up bilingually … is a gift of immense proportions, one that affords the child a perspective on the world that simply cannot be gotten any other way. And similarly, in terms of how one comes to self-identify vis-à-vis others and the rest of the world, my understanding is that such children have the gift of being multi-cultural and not tied to a single "world-view." Whether it matters for the American side of their identity and their self-image is a different issue, but my feeling is that it would not have a separating effect; rather, it could in principle allow the child to appreciate that much more keenly the American side, since he/she will have a ready-made point of comparison.

Experts must be prepared to answer any type of question they are asked. Although experienced linguists are familiar with answering a variety of questions from students, less experienced linguists may find such questions challenging to answer tactfully. Experts also need to separate out personal opinion from statements of fact, which may also be more difficult for less experienced linguists.

I also found that students do not necessarily have an accurate understanding of the concepts or ideas they cite, as revealed in their summary of the reading that precedes their question. The student who posed the following question in the first forum did not realize that the view that Maori is "no good" is actually a myth, a misperception that Brian Joseph corrected.

> STUDENT: In Myth 2, Harlow [1998] states that the Maori language is "no good" because it borrows words from English. I think it is necessary for English to borrow certain terms since English is seen as the "international language." With as many words as English borrows from other countries and the lack of travel that Americans do in comparison with people from other countries, how did English get to be the worldwide international language?
>
> JOSEPH: First, let me say that I think that Harlow is actually arguing that those who adhere to the position that Maori is "no good" and justify their position by pointing to the presence of English loanwords are mistaken; that is, he sees it as a myth, not as a truism. But, regarding your question as to how English got to be an international language on such a scale, the answer lies partly in recent history and partly in more distant history. The spread of English in the 17th–19th centuries with the spread of the British Empire, to the Americas, to parts of Africa, to India and Pakistan, to the Far East, etc. gave English a strong foothold all around the world, and then American economic power in the post–World War II era and the preeminence of American popular culture in recent years have extended the prestige of English on a worldwide scale. The reasons are thus more social in nature than anything about the nature of the language itself (e.g. a willingness on the part of speakers of English to borrow words).

Experts should feel free to correct students' understanding of concepts when needed, as Brian Joseph did. One might ask whether the burden of correcting the student should fall on the instructor instead. In that case, the instructor would need to screen the actual questions before sending them to the expert and would need to ask students to correct their questions to make them "acceptable" for the expert to answer. I suggest that the instructor should avoid taking on this type of editorial role and that students should be given the opportunity to communicate directly with the expert. This necessarily involves asking them to take responsibility for their understanding of the reading and the way their question is formulated.

Finally, some views expressed in the reading for the forum may conflict with the views of the forum expert, as was the case in the forum on AAVE. Trudgill (2000) suggests that many features of AAVE have their origin in an "English creole or at least a variety with creole-like features" (59) spoken by the first Africans in the United States (though he also suggests that other features were most likely inherited from British dialects). In contrast, Don

Winford argues that AAVE was never a creole and that it originated entirely in the British English dialects. This difference of opinion is highlighted in the following excerpts of exchanges from the forum:

> STUDENT: Trudgill [2000] talks about the theory that AAVE came from Africa from "a sort of Pidgin language" (53).[5] I am wondering if AAVE would have been considered a lingua franca.
>
> WINFORD: That's just not accurate, not even remotely true. AAVE originated in the southern United States as a result of the second language acquisition of English dialects imported from parts of Britain, especially Northern Ireland and southern England. Pidgins are lingua francas, but AAVE is not one of them.
>
> STUDENT: Trudgill [2000] insists that AAVE is not "inferior" and that it has grammatical features that make it a legitimate variety of English (52), but is there enough of a difference between other creoles and their mother language that they would be considered completely different languages?
>
> WINFORD: AAVE is not and never has been a creole. It is indeed a legitimate dialect of English with rules of grammar like any other dialect. As for creoles, yes, most of them are quite distinct languages from their lexifier languages, and are generally mutually unintelligible with them.

Given Trudgill's and Winford's differing views, it would have been preferable for me to discuss the viewpoints of these two linguists with the students prior to holding the forum. I should also have asked the students to read an article that reflects the views of the forum expert to prepare them for the types of answers they would receive and to enable them to better understand the expert's analysis of the issues under discussion. I suggest that instructors anticipate the possibility of differing viewpoints prior to holding the forum, since, as beginning learners, the students lack experience sorting out linguists' potentially opposing views on specialized topics.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FORUMS. As outlined earlier, I had four teaching goals for the online forums: giving students a chance to practice posing informed questions tied to the class readings and to their interests, inviting experts with more expertise in a particular area than I have to answer students' questions, enabling students to learn from each other's questions and the experts' replies, and giving students an opportunity to interact with a language expert other than a linguist.

Regarding my first teaching goal, I used student grades as a way to assess whether students successfully posed questions in the required three-part format—(1) summary of an issue from the reading, (2) tie-in with the student's experience, and (3) student's actual question—which I took to be an indication that the students had effectively practiced forming thoughtful

questions based on class readings and on their interests. Of the 15 students in the class, only 1 received a low grade for one of the forums, and this was due to the student's failure to understand the reading.[6] The other students received high grades. The fact that most of the students were able to pose questions in the three-part format suggests that the forums were an effective learning experience for them.

In planning the forums, I also hoped that asking the students to relate the forum themes to their own lives in posing questions would enable them to find personal significance in the themes rather than simply thinking of them as course topics that they were required to discuss. I did not ask students to comment on the effectiveness of this approach specifically in their wrap-ups, so I am unable to demonstrate whether this method actually enhanced their learning, but one student did comment that she gained a better appreciation of the concept of avoidance by linking it with her own experience.

> Until I read Trudgill [2000], I had not given a lot of thought to address terms and was unaware of the sociolinguistic concept of avoidance. And then I experienced this personal connection that resonated with me as I realized that I now had the language and knowledge to explain why I have never really addressed my in-laws with any address terms for the last twenty years!

When the student found a personally meaningful example to illustrate the concept, she became interested in it and curious to know whether Dikka Berven had had an experience with avoidance similar to hers, which she did. Other students may have had similar realizations when they found ways to relate concepts from the readings to their personal experiences.

As for my second teaching goal, I invited specialists on historical linguistics, contact linguists, and the French language, literature, and culture, respectively, to be the experts for the forums. They answered a variety of questions that I could not have addressed as fully. For example, Brian Joseph answered questions about Albanian, Greek, Latin, Romany, the nature of linguae francae, and language planning for the U.S. educational system; Don Winford answered questions about the origins of AAVE, syntactic structures in AAVE, the development of pidgins and creoles, use of the term *Ebonics*, and language planning in the Caribbean; and Dikka Berven answered questions about the T/V system in French, French language attitudes, government efforts to "purify" French, teaching French as a foreign language, and avoidance as a pragmatic strategy in conversation. Don Winford and Dikka Berven, respectively, noted the following in their assessments of the forums.

> I found the experience quite enjoyable, and also challenging, since students asked some very complex questions about the origins of African American English and its relationship to other dialects of English and English-lexicon creoles. The questions

in fact suggested very great insight as well as critical thinking on the part of the students, and it was a pleasure to answer them.

All of the students' questions were very provocative, and it would be wonderfully interesting to have a discussion with everyone in person. The idea of having them ask me questions turned out to be an interesting way to do something interdisciplinary.

Because my specialty is Chinese linguistics, the experts provided more comprehensive answers and many more examples on these forum themes than I, or perhaps any one individual instructor, could have offered.

Regarding my third teaching goal, based on the variety of questions that students posed to the three experts and the detailed replies they received, I believe the class benefited from having an opportunity to read each other's questions and the experts' replies. One student commented, "What I particularly enjoyed most was reading Professor Joseph's responses to the interesting questions my fellow classmates posed." Although some of the students' questions were repetitive (an issue I address below), each forum included enough different questions that students could gain a broad overview of the forum theme from reading others' questions and the experts' replies.

The forum on address terms used an interdisciplinary approach to conducting one of the online forums, which I believe worked well. As a specialist in French language and culture, Dikka Berven highlighted the role of culture in her discussion of the forum theme rather than focusing primarily on language structure, as a linguist might. This is shown in the following excerpt from one of the exchanges in the forum.

STUDENT: In Myth 4, Lodge [1998] states, "In 1793 the Revolutionaries decapitated their king and the nation desperately needed a new symbol for its identity to ensure solidarity within France and distinctiveness without. The French standard language was roped in for the job" (30). My husband and I spent a month a France several years ago … We tried to incorporate [French] phrases in our interactions with native French speakers but found our efforts laughed at, ridiculed, and even ignored. We couldn't understand what it is we were doing that was so wrong that native speakers would be so obviously non-receptive to our efforts.… Why are some French native speakers so quick to reject efforts of non-French speakers to try to communicate in their language? Does this reaction come from centuries of using their language as a badge of their identity?

BERVEN: I have heard from other people as well that while in France, they felt that the French people had laughed at, ridiculed, or even ignored their efforts to speak French. I have come to understand that at the bottom of this misunderstanding there can be confused cultural cues, and not just linguistic ones. It is very possible that you may have felt that someone was ridiculing you, when in fact, that is not what was going on.… It is possible

> that people really and truly could not figure out what you were saying! … The French are actually very polite and take pride in their politeness, and it may be this very politeness that makes one think they are ignoring your efforts.… George Bush traveled to France when Jacques Chirac was president, in order to commemorate the D-Day invasion. When they were in Normandy at a press conference, Bush addressed Chirac as "Jacques." This was a big shock to Monsieur Chirac and caused a ripple, because nobody ever addresses the French president by the first name. Bush certainly meant no offense, but inadvertently was extremely impolite.

Dikka Berven's reply focused considerable attention on the social and historical context affecting French language use. Through her anecdotes and examples pertaining to language use in French culture, Berven brought to life the sociolinguistic concepts discussed in the forum reading. I suggest that linguists consider the possibility of inviting an expert from a related discipline for one of the forums to give students exposure to a broader array of perspectives on language use.

REPETITIVENESS OF STUDENT QUESTIONS. The main problem that I encountered with the online forums was that some of the student questions tended to be repetitive, as pointed out in Brian Joseph's assessment of the first forum:

> For my part, I enjoyed the online forum experience. Admittedly, some of the questions were a bit repetitive, but each one was asked with considerable earnestness and formulated thoughtfully so I really felt that I was being afforded an opportunity to hold forth to a willing audience, and what academic can pass up a chance like that?!

A possible reason for repetition is that students may indeed have had similar questions about the forum theme. All of my students were K–12 teachers planning to teach English as a second language. Many of them asked questions that reflected their professional concerns, which tended to be similar. I suggest that if the experts want to avoid answering similar questions separately, they could provide a group response instead.

Another possible reason for the repetitiveness of student questions is that some students may look at other students' postings in drafting their own questions and may, unfortunately, plagiarize other students' ideas. This is difficult to prevent since the nature of participation in online forums is that all participants can normally see one another's postings. One option for preventing plagiarism would be to require students to pose a different question if their question is too similar to someone else's, but this would involve asking the students to post a draft of their question by a certain deadline and then to revise their question if needed and post a final version by another deadline. The instructor would also need to keep track of who posed which

question first. A simpler solution would be to ask students to submit their questions so that they are not visible to the other students, which is what I plan to do next time. Once the instructor has sent the questions to the expert and received the expert's replies, the questions and answers can then be made visible to the students in an online forum.

CONCLUSION. Overall, the three online forums with experts held in my online sociolinguistics course were rewarding for the students. They gave the students an opportunity to learn about several key themes in sociolinguistics from three language experts with areas of expertise that are different from mine. The students enjoyed having direct access to the experts, and the additional perspectives provided by the experts broadened the students' understanding of sociolinguistics. The forums gave the students a chance to practice formulating informed questions about sociolinguistics that were tied to the class readings and to their personal experience. Most of the students did this successfully, which suggests that the activity was an effective learning experience. The forums also enabled the students to learn from each other's questions and the experts' responses and to interact not only with linguists but with a language, literature, and culture specialist as well.

The asynchronous format of the online forums allowed me to avoid numerous potential logistical problems. The experts and students did not need to learn to use an unfamiliar Web conferencing software; the forums did not have to be scheduled far in advance; and the experts could spend however much time they desired to reply to student questions. For these reasons and others, I recommend the asynchronous format despite its limitations.

I carefully selected forum topics that were relevant for my class of K–12 teachers. I would take equal care in other sociolinguistics courses to choose topics that would be meaningful for the students. Broad, general topics such as those I used in this course work best since they are easiest for students to relate to their personal experience and interests. Such topics also allow students to formulate questions that they genuinely want to have answered. Following Sturgis (1983), instructors could also use this activity in advanced classes. Online forums with experts would be useful if the class is reading the writings of a leading linguist whose ideas are necessary to understand, or they could be used to explore the views of a linguist whose work is controversial or those of a linguist whose work has particular appeal to the class.

In summary, I suggest that asynchronous online forums with experts are a useful addition to online courses in sociolinguistics. They encourage students to engage with the themes of the course and to learn from experts' views on those themes. The explanations, examples, anecdotes, and corrections offered by the experts are meaningful to the students because they are tailored to their specific questions and interests.

NOTES

The first author wishes to thank the students in her ALS 570 class from winter 2009 at Oakland University for the questions they contributed to the online forums discussed in this article. The authors thank the editor, two anonymous reviewers, and Christine Mallinson for their comments on earlier versions of the article.

1. The discipline areas that were examined in Allen and Seaman's (2008) report are as follows: (1) business, (2) liberal arts and sciences, general studies, humanities, (3) health professions and related sciences, (4) education, (5) computer and information sciences, (6) social sciences and history, (7) psychology, and (8) engineering. Engineering is the only discipline area with much lower online representation than the other areas (3).
2. The four online courses in applied linguistics offered at the Oakland University Linguistics Department are ALS 570 "Language, Culture and Society" (2 credits), ALS 630 "Language Pedagogy" (4 credits), ALS 631 "Curriculum Material Design" (2 credits), and ALS 632 "Assessment and Compliance" (2 credits). The courses are required for Oakland University's ESL Endorsement Program for certified teachers and can also be applied toward Oakland University's M.A. in Linguistics with a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Specialization.
3. I use the term *forum* here to refer to the type of asynchronous collaborative learning forum (Friesen 2004) that I used in Moodle, Oakland University's course management system.
4. Brian Joseph notes that he appreciated having the time to develop and edit his answers (pers. comm., Jan. 16, 2010).
5. The student is mistaken. Trudgill actually says that, according to one view, the "first American Blacks spoke some kind of English Creole" (53) rather than a pidgin. He states further that this view holds that "the earliest American Blacks had a creole as their native language" (54).
6. One student received a grade of zero twice because she failed to submit a question by the deadline.

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DOI 10.1215/00031283-2010-013

MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR CURRICULUM FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

In Other Words: Lessons on Grammar, Code-Switching, and Academic Writing
By David West Brown
Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2008. Pp. xxv + 150.
ISBN 978-0-325-02188-1; $26.25

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In Other Words: Lessons on Grammar, Code-Switching, and Academic Writing offers a series of carefully designed lesson plans for teaching adolescents about grammar, dialects, register, and academic language. Drawing from research on contrastive analysis, dialects of American English, and systemic functional linguistics, the lessons lead students and teachers through a series of activities intended to draw from students' existing knowledge about language and foster exploration of linguistic practices. The intended audience of the book is middle- and high-school English language arts teachers, though many activities in the book also seem appropriate for college-level introductory linguistics or educational linguistics classes. Brown's book is one of the few published sociolinguistics-based language curricula for adolescent learners. Two features of Brown's approach to language and grammar instruction