

Journal of Trainee Teacher Education Research

A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from case study research, into how Year 13 students' understanding about language variation is developed through the study of accents and dialects in Britain

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Abstract

This paper investigates how a group of Year 13 A Level English Language students' understanding about language variation is developed through their study of accents and dialects in Britain. Research has suggested that students find the A Level to be new, different and even unusual. By allowing students to draw on and develop from their own pre-existing knowledge to learn about and apply new linguistic terminology and ideas through a sequence of three lessons, students showed an increased awareness of the topic - within the wider subject of English Language.

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Introduction

In this study, I investigated how a group of Year 13 students' understanding about language variation was developed through their study of accents and dialects in Britain. My study took place within the context of my class of Year 13 students who were currently studying English Language at the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A Level) – the secondary school leaving qualification offered in England. There are a number of interrelated reasons to why I chose A Level English Language as the topic of study. Noting its place as one of the fastest growing A Level subjects, Carter states that an increasing number of students who, because of their love of the subject which they acquire during their A Level studies, are continuing to study it at higher education level and above (as cited in Goddard & Beard, 2007:3). I myself am fascinated by the subject, and I chose to not only study English Language at A Level, but also for my undergraduate degree. However, my own academic interest in the subject of English Language is an ancillary motivating factor for my choice of it as the topic of this study. Rather, my research is also fuelled by a fascination with the spread and transmission of the subject.

Carter remarks how “English Language A Level is, contrary to many assumptions, not new. It has been available as an A Level for over twenty years, even though it is in the last five years that is exponential growth has been most sharply witnessed” (ibid.). Yet, as Goddard and Beard (2007) note, it is a field which many English teachers are unconfident about, and a subject which many students who study it at A Level find to be somewhat unexpected. It is within this context of a wider educational perception of the discipline of English Language as being new, different and even unusual with which I hope to launch my examination from. By using a particular aspect within the

A Level English Language syllabus – in the case of this study, students' understanding about language variation – as a lens with which I can hone in, I hope to be able to tease and draw out some of the underlying assumptions and understanding which they have about the wider field of English Language. More importantly, as an educator, I hope to see whether my teaching of this particular angle will lead to a development in the understanding of students towards both the topic and wider field of English Language.

Contextualising the Project

The study took place in the context of my second professional placement, which was a non-selective coeducational 11-18 academy situated in the East of England. The school offers English at the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) – a compulsory qualification which all students in England are required to complete. Moreover, a number of students also choose to take English Language at Advanced Subsidiary Level (AS) and A2 Levels, the two halves of a completed A Level. As a trainee teacher, I teach both GCSE English students as well as English Language students at both AS and A2 Levels. The class which I selected for my study was my A2 Level English Language class, which consisted of nine Year 13 students, aged 17-18. The specific A Level English Language programme which they were studying was the GCE English Language B Specification, designed and administered by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) examination board. I chose to base my teaching and research within Section B ('Language Change') of Unit 3 ('Developing Language') of the specification (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance [AQA], 2007).

Using approaches drawn from case study research, I first distributed questionnaires and held informal discussion with the whole class to identify any gaps within the subject group's understanding about language variation. I gave no information to the students about the nature of the questionnaire and my discussion with them except reassurance that they were not compelled to complete it, but if they wanted to do so, to answer the questions honestly and anonymously. From my preliminary analysis of data from the students' questionnaire responses, I identified what I thought were gaps in their understanding of language variation. I then constructed a sequence of three lessons, focusing on accents and dialects in Britain, to teach to the students. After my final lesson, I distributed a second set of questionnaires, as well as selecting three students for a focus-group interview to try to ascertain what developments, if any, there were in the students'

understanding about language variation. Again, I did not reveal to the students the purpose of my questionnaire and interview, but again, reassured them that their responses would be entirely voluntary and anonymised.

Outline of Teaching Sequence

After analysing the results of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) and the informal discussion with the students, I decided to focus on the accents and dialects in Britain as a way to develop their understanding of language variation. I developed a series of three lessons with which to frame and deliver the new understanding to the students. As with all my A Level English Language lessons, I started off my first lesson by showing them a grammar puzzle. Presenting them with ambiguous sentences such as “Flying planes can be dangerous”, “I once saw a deer riding my bicycle” and “Toilet out of order. Please use floor below”, I asked to comprehend, dissect and analyse the sentences. This activity was to increase their confidence in using linguistic terminology. After that, I showed them an extract from Trenite’s *The Chaos*, and asked them what the humorous use of homophones and homonyms by the author told them about the author’s attitude toward the English language. I then showed them a statement – “We all speak English, so we all sound the same” – and asked to discuss to what extent they agreed with it, and why. I then elicited from and introduced some linguistic terminologies relating to language change and variety with them (‘omission’ and ‘assimilation’), before reviewing the lesson.

In the following lesson, I introduced to the students the notion of English, as with all languages, being in a state of continual evolution. I presented to them a written text of the Lord’s Prayer in Standard Modern English, and then played an Old English reading of it, with the goal of raising students’ awareness of language change and variation. After playing them readings of texts prior to the Great Vowel Shift, I asked them what they thought contributed to phonological change (ease of articulation, and social prestige and changes in society). I then reviewed the terms ‘accent’ (the pronunciation of words associated with a particular region or social group) and ‘dialect’ (the variety of grammar and vocabulary associated with a particular region or social group) with the students. To further raise consciousness of their own individual attitude and understanding of language change and variation, I showed them a photograph of a group of young stereotypically socioeconomically-disadvantaged men and asked them what their thoughts and feelings towards the photograph were. I then repeated the same activity, except with a photograph of a group of young

stereotypically socioeconomically-advantaged men. After this, I played four audio clips of speakers with different accents (Cockney, Geordie and Yorkshire, Scouse and Received Pronunciation), and asked them to identify the accents and attribute adjectives to describe each speaker's physical attribute, educational background and personality. I ended the lesson by eliciting from the students their understanding of the difference between Received Pronunciation and Standard English (the former is the prestige accent of English, and the latter being its prestige dialect).

In my final lesson with the students, I reinforced their understanding of the difference between the accent of Received Pronunciation and the dialect of Standard English by showing them a clip from *The Fast Show*, and asking them to point out how humour is created by the actors speaking in a Received Pronunciation accent whilst using regional dialects. After that, I asked them to guess what they thought Freeborn's research on the three views towards accents and dialects (the 'incorrectness', 'ugliness' and 'impreciseness' views) showed, and what reasons they think might have led to the development of such views. I then showed them Atchinson's research on the four stages of language change, and asked them to guess how it might relate to language change and variety. After that, I introduced them to Giles's accommodation theory of language, before playing them two clips from BBC News – one from February 1958 and the other from October 2011 – which illustrated the informalisation of language. I ended these sequences of lessons by asking the students to reinforce and apply their new-found understanding of language variety and change by analysing two texts – a car advertisement from 1933 by Vauxhall Motors Ltd., and an advertisement from 2009 by Ford Motor Company – for their homework

Literature Review

Compared to other well established subjects such as English Literature and History, English Language is a relatively new subject in the A Level curriculum (Keen, 2000; Goddard, Henry, Mondor & van der Laaken, 2013). As late as the 1960s, there was little to no avenue for students to engage in serious language studies, which prompted Quirk (1964) to advocate a new school subject in the form of English Language. He and others such as Bloor (1979) thought that such a new fixture in the curriculum would contribute to remedying they perceived as the “common consent that the teaching of English Language in this country is seriously unsatisfactory” (Quirk, 1964:7). Since then, the reception, teaching and learning of the subject has grown dramatically (Goddard et al., 2013). Yet, despite the increasing popularity of this subject (Goddard & Beard, 2007), the

teaching and learning of the subject is still fraught with tensions and problems. I will first review some of these, before explaining how I seek to place my research into this educational context.

A Level and the English Curricula

Goddard et al. (2013) suggest that many students themselves are ill-prepared for the subject at A Level. This is in part, due to the lack of perquisite knowledge, but also due to lack of structural transitional cohesiveness from GCSE to A Level (ibid.). They note that presently, “the UK English curricula and their associated assessments currently show little evidence of opportunities for learners to reflect critically on language, virtual or otherwise” (ibid.:91), and that prior to A Level, students have few occasions to systematically study, analyse and critique “attitudes to language, language as cultural history and as a performance of identity, language as symbolic capital, language play, discourses and power” (ibid.). Goddard et al. suggest that new students are misguided in their approach to the subject; they “often come to A Level thinking that English Language is all about language use rather than analysis” (ibid.:92). Therefore, the frustration encountered by A Level English Language teachers, who are routinely tasked with effectively having to “start [English] Language study from scratch with their new students” (ibid.), is not only common, but understandable.

To compound this lack of expectation and familiarisation with A English Language from students, Goddard and Beard note “that many teachers of AS/A Level [English] Language have not themselves studied the subject at degree level” (2007:21). From their survey of 61 teachers who were attending commercial in-service courses in June and October 2006, they note “that AS/A Level English Language is being taught by many teachers who, by their own admission, feel their own subject knowledge is limited” (ibid.). Carter (1994) suggests that the gap in knowledge demonstrated by some teachers towards the linguistic concepts and terminology which are central to the subject of English Language can lead to a negative impact on their students’ own understanding of the subject. He argues “that if teachers have no formal training in linguistic awareness then they will lack categories and frameworks for thinking about and analysing crucial elements in learning and will therefore draw such categories from a common store of half-belief in which prejudice and fact combine indistinguishably” (ibid.:256).

The lack of smooth transition from GCSE to A Level study, predicated upon a lack of systematic English Language study, compounded by some teachers’ self-admittance of weaknesses in their

own subject knowledge, can be translated to an aggregate outcome where students are lacking in linguistic knowledge and confidence, which I think are both key to success in the subject. Goddard and Beard (2007) support this claim. Drawing on data they had gathered from questionnaires and follow-up discussions with two focus groups of 22 teachers, they note how the teachers of A Level English Language “tended to feel that students were underprepared, especially when it comes to linguistic knowledge and terminology” (ibid.:25). As this data is nearly a decade old, and the data drawn from a relatively small sample size, it will be interesting to see whether A Level English Language teachers on a national scale do still currently feel that students are underequipped in terms of linguistic knowledge and terminology.

To add another layer of complexity to this problem, teachers of A Level English Language have also stated that transmission of subject content to their students is problematic (ibid.). Drawing on from the same set of data which they had gathered from the focus groups of 22 teachers, Goddard and Beard state of the challenge which their interviewees perceived of “how to give students the theoretical knowledge they need to cope with the various examinations” (ibid.:26). The teachers “admitted to struggling with how to give students the required knowledge of grammar, when each component seemed to rely on another to be understood, and when student understanding and retention of understanding was so limited” (ibid.).

Perhaps the most interesting component of Goddard and Beard’s research is the idea that “no teachers interviewed thought that their students could acquire structural knowledge through independent study alone” (ibid.). This, in my experience, is too much of an overgeneralisation – some students can often gain much from independent study. For example, it would not be too surprising for an A Level student to master knowledge of the structure of English grammar independent of a teacher by studying a textbook. However, this might not be the case for all students, and it is still nevertheless an important notion which I will refer back to in the presentation and discussion of my data.

Though there is an assumption built into the A Level English Language specifications that prior knowledge or attainment is unnecessary (AQA, 2007; Goddard & Beard, 2007), the lack of any exposure which students have to the subject prior to studying it at A Level means that students and their teachers are often overwhelmed by the subject; the former, by the new wealth of new content, and the latter, by having to teach such a mass of information. Keen notes of the importance of

students being able to fully grasp what he labels as “the first stage of metalinguistic awareness [which] consists in problematizing broad linguistic categories, such as jargon and slang, enabling students to negotiate the meaning of these concepts in terms of their own language experience” (2000:17). He suggests that if this first stage of supplying students the prerequisite linguistic terminology and concepts is either omitted or not adequately administered, then “students may find it difficult to assimilate and reapply the progressively more challenging ideas and principles that they encounter in technical aspects of language study” (ibid.). As I have stated, my research interest is focuses on how students’ understanding of language variation is developed through the study of accents and dialects of Britain. I will now show what this means, and more importantly, why I think a technical, sophisticated understanding of language variation encapsulates a more general understanding of English Language.

‘Proper’ and Standard English

The study of accents and dialects in Britain is a fundamental aspect Section B (‘Language Change’) of Unit 3 (‘Developing Language’) of the AQA GCE English Language B Specification (AQA, 2007). The section explores, amongst other ideas, “historical and contemporary changes in the English Language from Late Modern English (1700+) to the present day, alongside explanations of their causes and impact” (ibid.:11). The study of the accents and dialects of Britain, which includes examining “attitudes towards language change and the impact of language standardisation...changes in written and spoken style...[and] the impact of social and political forces upon language usage and change” constitute an important aspect of this unit (ibid.). Before I explain what this means, and why this is an important lens to which examine students’ overall understanding of the subject, it should be important to point out and define one of the key concepts which students need to successfully negotiate the study of accents and dialects in Britain: that of ‘Standard English’.

In the academic study of English Language, the concept of Standard English “is a technical term used to identify a particular variety of English that has characteristic forms and functions” (Perera, 1994:81). It is a dialect rather than an accent, and thus, the label of “[S]tandard English refers to the structure of the language, i.e. its grammar and vocabulary, not to its pronunciation” (ibid.:80). In other words, the dialect Standard English may be spoken by speakers of any accents, including regional accents such as Scouse, Cockney and Geordie, or the non-regional Received Pronunciation

(RP). However, whatever accent it is spoken with, it is still Standard English. It is important to note that “[S]tandard English does not necessarily mean good English” (Perera, 1994:81). Yet, as Carter (1993), Smith and Taylor (1994) and Perera (1994) suggest, there is a set of socio-political attitudes attached to the term which not only affects one’s view of the dialect, but the very academic study of it.

Using the example of Prince Charles’s suggestion of there being a ‘proper’ English, Carter argues that this perpetuates an attitude of “of one standard English with a single set of rules accords with a monolingual, monocultural version of society intent on preserving an existing order in which everyone can be drilled into knowing their place” (1993 p. 6). Thus rather than simply being a descriptive term to describe a dialectal variety of English, Standard English becomes transfigured into a prescriptive term of what is allegedly ‘proper’ English. Carter states that this “connection of English with proper is very common” (ibid. p. 5), and more interestingly, suggests that “[i]t underlines how views of English and English teaching are encoded in terms of social propriety” (ibid.).

As someone who has been trained to describe and analyse features of the English language such as accents and dialects by adhering to academic objectivity, the idea of unscientific notions such as that of a ‘proper’ English not only affecting people’s perception of the language, but also translating into a misguided view of what should be a basic concept such as Standard English, is both curious and worrying. If one subscribes to this misguided view of what Standard English is, then it might mean missing out on one of the ‘Assessment Objectives’ which Section B examinees are examined on: AO1; the ability to “[s]elect and apply a range of linguistic methods, to communicate relevant knowledge using appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate written expression” (AQA, 2007:17). The prevalence of ideas such as that of a ‘proper’ English, and the subsequent misuse of a term such as Standard English, could partly explain why then, as Goddard and Beard’s (2007) research shows, students are initially surprised when they first encounter A Level English Language.

The Science of Language

Before I go on to further review what a good understanding of the study of English Language should entail, I think it is important to first refer again to the weakness in the structural transitional cohesion from GCSE to A Level. The study of English Language at GCSE level, as I have

suggested before, is extremely limited. What is covered is largely “predicated on [S]tandard English, a concept which remains largely unanalysed in any documentation” (Goddard et al., 2013. p. 91). Goddard et al. criticises the lack of “recognition of language varieties even within the UK, let alone any of the larger scale Englishes that operate in different parts of the world” in the GCSE curriculum, and suggests that as well as underarming students, it could be undermining their study of A Level English Language by equipping them with misconceived notions of language variation (ibid.).

Despite these reservations, there is still room for optimism, and this is demonstrated most clearly by the positive response some students show towards studies of A Level English Language. Extrapolating from their analysis of 271 questionnaire responses received from AS Level English Language students attending a series of day conferences hosted by an HEI in April 2006, Goddard and Beard comment on how students’ study of the subject “had enabled them to see that texts needn’t be taken at face value; and that it was possible to stand back from language and evaluate it, rather than simply use it” (2007:17). From their study about language, students are thus able to realise that they could look at language – including concepts such as Standard English – objectively. This increase in students’ awareness of what A Level English Language actually entails during the course of their studies is also reflected in the responses of three focus groups involving a total of 32 AS Level English Language students who attended another series of day conferences hosted by an HEI in July 2006. Commenting on their results, Goddard and Beard state that:

“[T]here were a number of different stories or ‘takes’ in the A Level student population about what language study is, about what is good about it, and about what it is good for. Some students really enjoyed taking what they saw as a ‘scientific’ approach to language study, while others enjoyed its more creative potential as an ‘arts’ subject whose study could enrich individual performance skills. Crossing between these domains was not always seen as a comfortable ride. One participant comically related his experience of one minute being happily immersed in his own creative writing, only to be started on lessons about phonetics where his short story was whipped away and replaced by a cross-section of someone’s vocal organs.”

(ibid.:31)

Bloor (1979) suggests that the gap between the new wealth of concepts and terminology in English Language and the students’ existing knowledge of and implicit insights into language should be exploited. He suggests that it would be educationally productive for teachers to foster a natural interest in talking and thinking about language before moving on to teach in a more “empirical investigatory approach where formal concepts and metalanguage may be developed as the need for

them arises” (ibid.:20). This is supported by Carter, who argues that students “possess considerable resources of mainly implicit knowledge about the way language changes according to purposes according to purposes, audience and context” (1994:255). If teachers of English Language can exploit this wealth of resource, then it would not only mean a development in students’ language awareness, but perhaps more importantly, their overall confidence in the subject.

My decision to use students’ understanding of language variation through the study of accents and dialects in Britain as a lens through which to examine their linguistic knowledge, as well as wider awareness of the academic requirements of English Language, is based on this notion that students’ existing implicit linguistic knowledge is one of the most effective vehicles with which to build up their language skills. Bloor reinforces this, suggesting that though “[l]anguage can profitably be considered in abstract without reference to perceive sociocultural settings...from the point of view of introducing language studies in school, the sociocultural aspect does seem to offer them most promise” (1979:20; emphasis in original). Therefore, engaging the students with something they know – such as utilising their existing knowledge and attitudes towards accents and dialects of Britain, and then asking them to self-critique them – is probably the most effective approach to developing their understanding of language variation. This idea is reinforced by Bloor, who notes of “increased self-respect as [being] a central outcome of bidialectal studies” (ibid.). This is a notion which deserves to, and will be, examined further.

Research Questions

As I have been suggesting, I believe that examining students’ study about accents and dialects in Britain – most saliently, by exposure to and exposure of the notion of Standard English – can give some insight into their understanding about language variation. Such study, which will include introducing and demanding that they apply new linguistic terminology and ideas, is most effective if it draws on and develops from their own pre-existing knowledge. If they are able to do this successfully, this may in turn further advance their understanding of other related concepts within the subject of English Language. Ultimately, I hope that this will not only lead to an increased awareness of the subject, but perhaps more crucially, bring about an increased sense of confidence. From my examination of my data, I hope to find out to what extent these series of proposition could be considered accurate and true. Before I do this, I will first explain my methodology and research

methods of gaining my data, as well as briefly commenting on some ethical issues which I took into consideration.

Ethical Issues

As real students within a real school setting were used for my study, I had to take into consideration a number of ethical issues, including respect for both the participants and the environment which they were situated in. Drawing on guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), I made sure to seek informed consent from the students and the school's English department before conducting my research. I was open about the nature of my research, and I made sure there was no deception and subterfuge in my research. I informed all the students who took part in the research that they were free to withdraw at any point, and I confirmed to them that their wholly anonymised participation of my study would therefore not lead to any unexpected disadvantage, loss or harm.

Methodology and Research Methods

For this particular study, I chose to use a case study approach as the central investigative lens with which to examine the particular topic. This approach was selected for several interrelated reasons. The principal motivation underlying this choice was, as I have stated earlier, an interest in the thoughts and opinions of my students towards not only an aspect within the subject of English Language, but the very field itself. My act of looking at just one 'instance' – in the case of this study, honing in to focus on students' understanding about language variation – is “the starting point and arguably the defining characteristic of the case study approach” (Denscombe, 2010:52). By looking at this particular one instance, my study is driven by the principle that “there may be insights to be gained from looking at the individual case that can have wider implications and, importantly, that would not have come to light through the use of a research strategy that tried to cover a large number of instances...The aim is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular” (ibid.).

An additional strength of the case study approach is the flexibility which it allows the researcher to exercise in terms of collecting varied research data. Denscombe suggests that the case study approach not only allows a multitude of data collection and therefore data types, but “it actually invites and encourages the researcher to do so...Whatever is appropriate can be used for

investigating the relationships and processes that are of interest” (ibid.:54). With this in mind, I decided to develop a questionnaire which I distributed to the class before my series of lessons with them to gauge the students’ understanding about language variation, as well as engaged in an informal discussion with the whole class to elicit understanding about the subject matter. After my sequence of lessons, I redistributed questionnaires to the whole class, as well as selected a few students to participate in a focus group interview.

Questionnaires are a good way to accurately gauge the general opinions, attitudes, views, beliefs, preferences of respondents towards a particular topic (ibid.). As I only wanted to measure the general understanding of the students before and after my lesson, there was no requirement for personal, face-to-face interaction. Rather, a standardised set of data from the respondents would prove more useful for me. I paid close attention to Denscombe’s (ibid.) suggestion for creating a questionnaire in which the questions which my students responded to were “absolutely vital for the research” (ibid.:162). By being “rigorous in weeding out any duplication of questions” (ibid.), and creating a variety of questions for the students to answer, I was able to prevent them from being bored and therefore minimise the chances of them “falling into a ‘pattern’ of answers where, for example, on a scale of 1 to 5 he or she beings to put 4 down as the answer to all questions” (ibid.:165).

I would suggest that the construction of a questionnaire with varied questions not only discourages participant boredom, and thus poor quality of responses, but more crucially, allows me to yield meaningful data: a questionnaire consisting of only closed questions such as yes/no questions would not lend itself to any useful data for analysis. Therefore, I created a questionnaire which comprised of both ‘open’ and ‘closed’ questions, as per Denscombe’s (ibid.) suggestion and my own reason. For example, there were list, yes/no and Likert Scale questions. It should be pointed out that the questionnaires, in addition to allowing me to tease out from my students their understanding – before and after my lessons – towards language variation, also fulfilled an auxiliary role of allowing me to expose and raise the consciousness of students towards the subject matter. As an educator, this opportunity for students to learn was naturally valuable.

After distributing and collecting my final questionnaires (Appendix 2) to the students, I decided to obtain not only even more, but more importantly more precise data, from the students. This next and final part of my data collection would be in the form of a focus group interview. Doing so

would allow me to be better equipped to discover the extent to which my sequence of lessons had an educational impact on them, but more significantly, allow me to probe more deeply into not only the students' understanding of the subject at hand, but also, what their general attitude towards the wider field of English Language was. At this point, it is important to note the interview which I set up with my focus group was semi-structured. That is to say, I had a clear idea of the questions which I wanted to be addressed and answered. However, as Denscombe notes, as the interviewer I was "prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher" (ibid.:175). Thus, as I will show later, I allowed for the student respondents to answer however they wanted. Such flexibility, and lack of rigid demand in my questioning, meant the responsibility was on me as the interviewer to seek openings within the students' responses, and to encourage them to build on whatever issue I felt they had hinted at.

The focus group consisted of three randomly-picked students out of the class of nine Year 13 students; 33% of the total. I believe this number was sizeable enough to allow me to accurately consider and evaluate the attitudes, understanding and feelings of the group about the subject of language, and the extent to which these beliefs were shared and common. I was keen to use focus groups rather than one-to-one or group interviews for a number of reasons. As I wanted to draw out from the students a particular data set – that is to say, students' understanding about language variation – and I knew that they had all, as students of the same class who have all taken my class, held a similar level of knowledge, I decided that focus group interview would be the most appropriate type of interview. Denscombe (ibid.) suggests that group dynamics, as characterised by interaction between students, are an important benefit of focus group interviews. It is worth pointing out that my choice of focus group interview as my method of gathering data encouraged, as I will show later, the interaction amongst the student respondents. This enabled the generation and elicitation of spontaneous data which I had not actively sought, and thus allowed me to glean information which I would have not otherwise obtained with another interview type lacking in participant interaction, such as one-to-one or group interviews. Thus I saw myself as more of a facilitator of group interaction, rather than a leader of an interview.

My reliance on group dynamics as a way to elicit more natural data also brought it with another benefit. Another important aspect of the interview which should not be overlooked is the personal identity of the interviewer is important. In the case of this research project, not only was I fulfilling

the role of data gatherer and interviewer, but I was fulfilling the role of teacher to the student participants. Denscombe (ibid.) argues that identity of the interviewer, and his or her relation to the participant, is important. He suggests that some questions can prompt participants to feel embarrassed, awkward or defensive, and therefore allow “the possibility that interviewees might supply answers which they feel fit in with what the researcher expects from them – fulfilling the perceived expectations of the researcher. Or the answers might tend to be tailored to match what the interviewee suspects is the researcher’s point of view, keeping the researcher happy” (ibid.:179). An outcome such as this would have been unhelpful as the quality and integrity of the data would have been compromised. Thus I aimed to minimise this by adopting a passive and neutral self-presentation, as advised by Denscombe (ibid.), and as noted earlier, reassured them that their participation in my research would be anonymised and not lead to any harm to themselves nor the school.

I decided that the advantages of a focus group interview, incorporated together with the use of questionnaire as part of a larger case study approach, far outweighed any possibility of unreliability stemming from student inhibition towards myself as their teacher interviewer. The depth of data insight which I could collect because of the flexibility of the focus group interview, combined with the more general level of information afforded by the questionnaire, leads me to believe that I will be able to extrapolate a lot about the students and their understanding of language variation, and from that, their wider attitude towards English Language. From a teacher’s point of view, as I remarked earlier, both the questionnaire and focus group interview were educationally valuable. The questionnaire allowed me to implicitly hint to the students the content of their upcoming studies, thereby preparing them for my sequence of lessons. The questionnaire which I distributed after the final lesson, as I will show, undoubtedly boosted their confidence in what they learnt. Furthermore, as suggested by Denscombe (ibid.), the focus group interview was therapeutic for the informants, my students. Again, any activity which leads to a boost in their confidence in and awareness of their academic subject is in my opinion educationally valuable.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Prior to my sequence of lessons, I distributed a questionnaire to find out some information about the students before I taught my sequence of lesson (Appendix 1). The information which I wanted to find out from the students included their attitudes towards and understanding of English Language,

as well as their understanding about accents and dialects in Britain. I believe that the latter, in turn, would allow me to ascertain the level of their understanding about language variation, and thus, enable me to decide to what extent I would have to develop their knowledge. In regard to this latter point, it is worth that the questionnaire performed an extra function as a type of formative assessment, or more accurately, as ‘assessment for learning’. Therefore, it was paramount to gain my data as subtly as possible, so as not to create any suspicion. If I had framed my questionnaire as a piece of assessment, students might have felt anxiety to perform or answer ‘correctly’; this would have adversely affected my data.

Yes	3 (“Proper English”: 2; and “British English”: 1)
No	6

Table 1: Responses to “Do you have an accent and/or dialect?” from the first questionnaire

One of the most important questions which allowed me to infer the students’ attitudes towards and understanding about accents and dialect in Britain was a yes/no question which asked students whether they thought they had an accent and/or dialect. What was interesting from the initial set of responses (Table 1) was the idea that two-thirds of the student respondents replied ‘No’. This was naturally unfounded, as everyone who uses language, including English, speaks it with some form of an accent and dialect. What was also interesting were the students’ negative or lack of responses to the question of whether Received Pronunciation is an accent (Table 2). This, I deduced, meant that there were some uncertainty and confusion amongst the students about what exactly both an accent and Received Pronunciation were.

Yes	4
No	0

Table 2: Responses to “Is Received Pronunciation (RP) an accent?” from the first questionnaire

During the course of the informal discussion which I had with the students after I had received these questionnaires, I was interested to find that the students initially thought that only other people spoke with an accent and dialect: each of them had genuinely thought that they did not have an accent or dialect. On further questioning, some of the students remarked how “Obama has an American accent”, and “chavs have rough working class accents”. What was also curious from the students’ responses was those that did respond ‘yes’ believed they either spoke “Proper English”,

which, as I have discussed earlier, is an unhelpful term (see Carter, 1993), and “British English”, which though correct, is too broad a term to be useful.

From this piece of data, I surmised that students were aware, even if it was only implicitly, of the notion of accents and dialects being linked to sociocultural attitudes and value. The fact that they thought only ‘other’ people had accents – whether they were people from outside Britain or people of a different (lower) socioeconomic class – aroused some interest in me. It was this notion of attitudes to accents and dialects being a reflection of one’s attitude to socioeconomic class which prompted me to take up both Bloor’s (1970) and Carter’s (1994) suggestion to take advantage of their pre-existing knowledge to introduce new concepts and ideas to them.

Using photographs of stereotypically socioeconomically-contrastive men (Appendices 2 and 3), as well as audio clips of speakers with different accents, I used the students’ own ideas which I had inferred from them to construct a theoretical scaffold from which they could not only access linguistic concepts such as the notion of objective descriptivism, and the correct use of ‘accents’ and ‘dialects’, but more importantly, to critique their pre-existing prejudices with these new tools. It is worth pointing out Keen’s observation of the difficulty between utilising students’ own knowledge whilst at the same time not strengthening any existing biases:

“One of the most difficult problems of language study...is how to deploy students’ existing understanding of language without at the same time activating the prejudices and folk linguistics which form such a large part of what passes for common sense about language.”
(1992:84)

To avoid such an issue, I first introduced the formal definitions of accents and dialects to them, and then explain that all accents and dialects in Britain are tied to specific regions e.g. Scouse to Merseyside, Cockney to East London and Geordie to Tyneside. The only exceptions are Standard English and Received Pronunciation, which are respectively the prestige dialect and prestige accent of Britain. I then elicited their prejudgements towards different accents and dialects, and after questioned whether their biased opinions had any basis, ended with them acknowledging that they had none. As suggested by Keen (*ibid.*), I reinforced their newfound descriptive approach towards accents and dialects by providing a purely factual account about the phonological and grammatical structures of a few of the most widely-spoken accents and dialects.

After my sequence of lesson, there was a dramatic reversal in the responses which the students gave in my second questionnaire (Appendix 2) to the same question of whether they thought they had an

accent and/or dialect (Table 3). Apart from one student, the whole class realised that as speakers of a language, they all had an accent and a dialect. Furthermore, in contrast to their earlier responses to whether Received Pronunciation is an accent, all nine students answered positively (Table 4). This showed to me that they could understand the definitions of ‘accent’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’, as well as make the link between the two terms.

Yes	8 (“Received Pronunciation”: 8)
No	1

Table 3: Responses to “Do you have an accent and/or dialect?” from the second questionnaire

Nevertheless, what was interesting though was that most of them still attached some positive value to what is merely a neutral descriptor (‘Received Pronunciation’). The fact that all those who did respond positively to my question of whether they thought they had an accent and/or dialect affirmed that they spoke with a Received Pronunciation accent is curious. From my time with the class, there was no one instance which leads me to believe this is true. Therefore, though I had developed students’ understanding about language variation to be less opinionated and valued, and thus more objective and descriptive, it is still interesting to see students attaching positive connotations to Received Pronunciation, if only in self-directed instances.

Yes	9
No	0

Table 4: Responses to “Is Received Pronunciation (RP) an accent?” from the second questionnaire

Another point of interest is the contrast of the student’s notion of prescriptivism before and prior to my sequence of lessons. One set of data which intrigued me was the students’ responses to the extent which they agree that double negatives – such as “I don’t have no money on me” – in English are illogical (Table 5). Over 70% of the students seemed to believe that constructs in a language could be ‘illogical’. From this, I inferred that the students were too subjective in their view of language, and this suggested to me that perhaps Carter’s suggestion of students ascribing to a notion of “of one standard English with a single set of rules accords” (1993, p. 6) had some element of truth to it.

Strongly Agree	5
Agree	2
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	0

Table 5: Responses to “To what extent do you agree with the following statements? ‘Double negatives in English are illogical’ (e.g. “I don’t have no money on me”)” from the first questionnaire

The correction of such unscientific view was, in my opinion as a teacher of English Language, paramount. Not only would such subjective view be detrimental if applied in their A Level exams, I also thought that such prescriptivism was harmful for students’ wider understanding of what English Language as a subject within the wider academic field of Linguistics entails. Drawing on from the accepted notion of Standard English being one of many different dialects in Britain (see Perera, 1994), after teaching the students the difference between accents and dialects, I elicited from them the idea that Standard English was a dialect, albeit a unique one in the sense that it occupied the position of being the prestige dialect of Britain. I grounded my explanation within the context of historical linguistics, and referring to the idea of language change being a perpetual but objective phenomenon in my first and third lessons, I stressed to the students the importance of A Level examiners wanting to see language use being described objectively.

Strongly Agree	0
Agree	1
Neither agree nor disagree	5
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	3

Table 6: Responses to “To what extent do you agree with the following statements? ‘Double negatives in English are illogical’ (e.g. “I don’t have no money on me”)” from the second questionnaire

After my sequence of lessons, it was positive to see such a change in the responses of students to the question of the extent which they agree that double negatives – such as ‘I don’t have any money on me’ – in English are illogical’ (Table 6). Only one student agreed to the subjective idea that any construct in language could be considered ‘illogical’. However, though the remaining eight other students no longer expressed certainty in their belief of such an idea – a shift of nearly 90% - what was ambiguous was whether these students simply did not agree with my statement, or did not agree with the premise of my statement. In other words, it is difficult to work out from their answers whether these students think double negatives are logical, or whether they disagree with

such a purposefully subjective statement. In essence, this question invites ambiguity, and therefore should have been modified.

I ended my research with a focus group interview with three students randomly chosen from the class. I wanted to find out from them what their understanding of and attitudes towards the wider subject of English Language were. This seemed important to me, as their responses told me the approach with which they would study the subject, and hence, what they would learn from it. I decided to begin my interview by asking them what their thoughts of A Level English Language were. Student 2 (S2) stated her approval about the variety of the sections and units within the AS and A2 specifications – “Child Language Acquisition and Language Change are so different” – and Student 3 (S3) also remarked how “varied” the subject was. The most interesting response for me, however, was from Student 1 (S1). She stated her endorsement for the subject: “It’s good because it’s not GCSE...This is quite modern”. On further probing, I found that she preferred the concentration on language, rather than “just studying literature like in GCSE”.

I used S1’s response as an opportunity to segue to the question of asking the focus group whether they were surprised by the difference between English Language at GCSE level and A Level. S2 responded that she was “not sure what to expect...My older brother took it...I liked English... I liked writing... It’s a lot more interesting”. Seeing that there was some they had some preconceived expectation, I asked them whether they knew that they would not be studying literary figures such as Shakespeare. S3 responded: “We knew we wouldn’t do this”. Thus I asked the students what they thought was the outcome of their studies:

S2: You look at language more and the analysis is different. In [English] Language, it’s all about the language. [English] Literature is more about the context.

S3: You can look at things more critically....like [sic] adverts such as the car adverts

S1: I agree. It’s more natural to say, [sic] analyse speech

It was interesting to see that the students had some concrete idea of the sort of educational outcome which they had gained from having studied the subject at A Level. I used this opportunity to question whether my sequence of lessons had changed the way they looked at language. All three students agreed that though my lessons were helpful, they had already knew of the nature of A Level English Language, including the need to know linguistic terminology and concepts, as well as the need to comment on, analyse and critique language impartially and objectively. Their response

contradicted the data which I had yielded from my first questionnaire, and there, I decided to be more specific in my questioning. I asked them what approach they would take towards analysing language variation now that I had taught them my sequence of lessons:

S1: More likely to be more specific, and more cautious...I'd say an accent is Geordie now

S3: Before, you would have just said it's rough

S2: We studied accents and dialects so [we're] not really stereotyping anymore

These responses gave me some hope that even though they knew about the importance of being an objective descriptivist in the subject of English Language, all three now could demonstrate some concrete specifics to treating dialects and accents of Britain. Together with the responses of the post-lesson class questionnaire, their responses gave me hope that my lesson had ensured that they had learnt something. On a broader note, it was positive to hear S1's remark of how "When [she] hear[s] language, [she] can analyse language automatically", as well as S2's hope to study Spanish and French at undergraduate level, and the perceived usefulness of A Level English Language, with its focus on language, for her future studies.

Conclusion

I started this study with the view of examining how a group of Year 13 students' understanding about language variation is developed through their study of accents and dialects in Britain. I believe that the choice of using accents and dialects in Britain as a vehicle with which to guide the students to a better understanding of language variation was appropriate and useful. As I have shown, it seems that the students have gained a better understanding of the subject area. However, it is important to note that though my sequence of lessons undoubtedly affected their views, to what extent their development can be attributed to my teaching is uncertain. Moreover, it is doubtful whether their understanding of the wider subject of English Language has been dramatically developed because of their interactions with me. As I have stated, it seems that students came into the A Level knowing that the subject would be quite different to what they had done before. Therefore, it is uncertain whether my lessons had altered their pre-existing perception much. What is probably certain, however, is that their concrete understanding about language variation has been positively strengthened. One hopes that they will be able to apply such understanding in future scenarios where such understanding is required to be demonstrated, such as in their A2 Level exams.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Views on the study of the English language

I want to find out about your views on the study of the English language.

This questionnaire is confidential so please answer honestly!

1. Do you have an accent and/or dialect?

Yes

No

2. If 'yes', how would you describe it?
-

3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

'Double negatives in English are illogical' (e.g. "I **don't** have **no** money on me")

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The English language is not as beautiful as Italian'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'Mandarin (Chinese) is an ugly language'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'A person's accent and dialect reflect his or her background'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The Americans are ruining the English language'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The Yorkshire accent is a friendly accent'

Strongly disagree **Disagree** **Neither agree nor disagree** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

'A person's accent and dialect affects his or her intelligence'

Strongly disagree **Disagree** **Neither agree nor disagree** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

4. Is Received Pronunciation (RP) an accent?

Yes

No

5. What are the other names of Received Pronunciation e.g. Queen's English?

6. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'literature' and 5 being 'science', do you think the A Level English Language course **is** closer to 'literature' or 'science'?

Literature ←————→ **Science**
1 2 3 4 5

7. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'literature' and 5 being 'science', do you think the A Level English Language course **should** be closer to 'literature' or 'science'?

Literature ←————→ **Science**
1 2 3 4 5

8. Compared to your previous study of English at GCSE level, how well has the A Level English Language course matched your expectations?

Much less than expected **Less than Expected** **As expected** **More than expected** **Much more than expected**

Thank you very much for answering honestly.

Appendix 2

Revised views on the study of the English language

I want to find out about your views on the study of the English language.

This questionnaire is confidential so please answer honestly!

1. Do you have an accent and/or dialect?

Yes

No

2. If 'yes', how would you describe it?

3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

'Double negatives in English are illogical' (e.g. "I **don't** have **no** money on me")

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The English language is not as beautiful as Italian'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'Mandarin (Chinese) is an ugly language'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'A person's accent and dialect reflect his or her background'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The Americans are ruining the English language'

Strongly disagree

Disagree

**Neither agree nor
disagree**

Agree

Strongly Agree

'The Yorkshire accent is a friendly accent'

