

COMMENTARY

An Educational Response for Students Learning Standard English

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Raising the academic achievement of minority students represents an important educational goal for state policymakers, particularly in majority-minority states like California or Texas. In recent years, there has been [increasing attention](#) towards language variety as a potential explanation for lagging achievement observed among minority students and students of low socioeconomic status (SES). [Note: Language variety is often referred to as differences in dialect. In the study discussed here, the authors use the more neutral term language variety]. However, there is very little published literature to guide policymakers and administrators in formulating an appropriate educational response to language variety in schools.

A forthcoming article in *Educational Policy* ([Miciak, Wilkinson, Alexander, & Reyes, 2014](#)) summarizes a study commissioned by the Texas Legislature to identify best practices in serving students who speak language varieties other than standard English (for example, African American English (AAE) or Latino American English (LAE)). The commissioned study reviewed findings from a comprehensive literature review and the recommendations of an expert panel. This provided the basis for recommendations for an administrative and legislative response to the educational needs of these students in Texas. Miciak et al. review those recommendations so that they can be considered by other states or local education agencies (LEAs) that may wish to formulate a policy response to student language variety.

The expert panel, which included individuals who had knowledge of and direct experience with language variety, made five key recommendations:

1. Recognize students who speak language varieties other than standard English as Standard English Learners (SELs)—a subgroup with unique educational needs.
2. Build educators' knowledge of language varieties by modifying teacher preparation standards and providing professional development addressing language diversity.
3. Teach educators strategies such as contrastive analysis to help students acquire standard English. Contrastive analysis provides explicit instruction on the similarities and differences of standard English and other English language varieties.
4. Offer instruction that introduces language variety as an historical and social fact to all students. Such instruction could be embedded in social studies curricula to encourage study of the development and characteristics of different regional and/or socio/ethnic language varieties.
5. Take steps to create a thoughtful and tolerant environment that increases the acceptability of the proposed changes to all stakeholder groups. Stakeholder groups should include not only educators, but policymakers, parents, families, and the general public to assist with understanding the rationale behind language variety instruction. Past efforts to address language

variety have met with resistance when inadequately explained.

Both the literature review and expert panel findings reviewed in Miciak et al. (2014) present evidence that SELs represent a group whose educational needs should be addressed. Overall, the study recommends that teacher capacity should be increased such that teachers can recognize SELs in their classrooms and offer specialized instruction to meet their needs. In order to assist states that may wish to craft legislative and administrative actions to build this teacher capacity, the report concludes with a series of considerations and strategies that may help states or LEAs design effective programs for SELs and create a context for policy success.

*The [full study](#) is in Miciak, Jeremy, Cheryl Wilkinson, Celeste Alexander, and Pedro Reyes, "Addressing Language Variety in Educational Settings: Toward a Policy and Research Agenda," *Educational Policy*, forthcoming.*

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