A case study in teaching linguistics to middle school students with language-based learning differences

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Abstract

I report on a one-hour linguistics outreach session with approximately 20 middle school students with language-based learning differences. The session included discussion about subfields of linguistics, hands-on analysis of Swahili verbal morphology, and summary discussion about the validity of all varieties of language. Overall, this experience was successful and demonstrates that middle school students can productively learn elementary linguistic analysis, including those who might benefit the most from exposure to linguistics.

Background

A language-based learning difference (LBLD; also called a language-based learning disability or difficulty, though difference is often used among educators) is a disorder that affects ordinary use of written and/or spoken language: mixing up the order of letters and words, in reading or in writing (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia), misunderstanding certain kinds of linguistic structures (such as questions and imperatives), problems with reading or listening comprehension, difficulty in memorizing new sequences of numbers, in reading or in writing (such as smarter versus more intelligent), or difficulty in figuring out the relationship between syntax and semantics. Overall, this experience was successful and demonstrates that middle school students can productively learn elementary linguistic analysis, including those who might benefit the most from exposure to linguistics.

Methods

Opening 15 minutes: Overview of subfields of linguistics, focusing on the relationship between syntax and morphology, noting how English can express the same meaning in two different ways (e.g. smarter versus more intelligent).

Middle 30 minutes: We went through each problem one at a time. Students worked on the problems at their desks without much direct guidance at first, and as they worked through different pieces, I wrote their solutions up on the board (right or wrong), and opened it up to class discussion to reach consensus. We had time to get through most of the first two pages of problems.

Closing 15 minutes: Wrap-up discussion of how languages can differ from each other in morphology and syntax, as well as the order of elements. Final discussion included the importance and validity of all forms of language, an important lesson for students with LBLDs in particular, because their language skills are often considered subpar and they can have a great deal of insecurity about their language.

Materials

Three pages of prepared material, pictured to the right.

Printed hardcopies were handed out to the students, one page at a time, to retain focus on the task at hand.

Students were encouraged to write on the pages directly, making whatever notes they needed.

Students also wrote their names at the top of each page, so that their regular teachers could verify their participation in the activity.

Outcomes

The middle portion was very successful. Students enjoyed puzzling through the analysis and debating with each other about the solution. They were vocal, active, and stayed on task. They were especially happy to learn that they were solving a problem that is typically given to university students.

A notable issue arose with a student with dyslexia, who was aided by reconfiguring the data with graphical methods, using different boxes for each of the types of morphemes. Abstracting away from the letters helped them grasp the underlying patterns.

One student came up after the session to ask for more data to work with. I recommend always over-preparing material for outreach sessions like this.

Students were also receptive to the opening and closing portions, and were particularly interested in historical linguistics and constructed languages (Klingon, Elvish, etc.), which suggests natural topics for future outreach sessions.