2013 Research at Andrews

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In 2012, part of the AU Health Risk Study included questions about sexual behaviors. The questions measured actual practices as well as comfort levels, with questions such as “Which of the listed sexual behaviors would you feel comfortable doing prior to marriage?” and “With how many people have you hooked up with?”

Data on sexual behavior is harder to correlate across the nation, Helm says, “because researchers are asking the questions in different ways and approaching it from various angles.” The Andrews researchers approached it from an angle of risk, investigating possible connections between major life trauma and sexual practices. Initial analysis of these results suggests similar trends as the drug and alcohol study—while some behaviors do occur, their incidence rate is much lower than the national average of 60–80%.

The Health Risk Study investigators originally expected their results to reflect the phenomenon of “cultural leveling,” which occurs when subcultures within a larger society become more like the dominant culture. “That doesn’t appear to be occurring in terms of substance abuse,” Helm says. Adventist college students maintain their low substance abuse rates, even as the American college culture continues to party.

The fact that Adventist college students consistently seem to be making better life choices than many of their peers suggests that Adventist culture does something to shield its young members from harmful behaviors, an intriguing possibility to both the Adventist church and researchers across the nation. The lack of much cultural leveling in Adventist college culture is an anomaly that McBride believes is of further interest: “Sociologically, we’re a functional subculture in a competitive marketplace,” he says. “What we’re doing seems to be working for us, and spiritual involvement seems to be the most important factor in many of these behaviors.”

“Adventist college students maintain their low substance abuse rates, even as the American college culture continues to party.”
Russian, and one Chinese and had them read two standardized passages to six groups of composition students, most of whom were native speakers. One passage had no grammatical errors; the other had minor errors such as omitted articles and pluralized non-count nouns. Each speaker read to two separate groups: the grammatically perfect passage as a control, and the changed passage to a second group of listeners.

The listeners were then asked several comprehension questions as well as perception questions: was the speaker accurate, pleasant to listen to, and easy to understand? Kim found some very interesting results: not only was there no difference among the speakers in comprehension, there was also very little difference in perception: meaning that each of the speakers was clearly understood regardless of minor grammatical errors. The strength of a speaker’s accent affects how the listener perceives his speech, but not enough to make a difference in comprehension.

ENGLISH, COLONIALISM AND THE THREE CIRCLES

Much of English-language learners’ fear of not speaking well enough derives in part from a phenomenon linguists have titled Kachru’s Three Circles of English, named after Braj Kachru, a professor emeritus of linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He suggested that there were three different groups of English speakers, who formed a hierarchy of sorts. The central “circle” comprises speakers from countries where English is the first and main language: the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia. The second circle—called the “outer circle” represents countries where English became a dominant language through colonization, such as India, the Philippines, and many countries in Africa. The third or “expanding” circle contains countries that are voluntarily adopting English as an additional language but haven’t developed their own English yet—such as China, Korea, Japan, and many Middle Eastern and South American countries.

According to Kachru, the inner circle produces the norm for language speaking. This practice still holds traces of colonialism, when the native people—and their languages along with them—were considered backward and forced to adapt to the English way of life. Recently, however, many English-language learners “resist sounding like inner-circle speakers. They want to retain their own identity, and want to colonize English rather than be colonized by it, to make it their own rather than follow the standard thrust upon them,” says Kim.

IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

A similar movement in the field of linguistics has been emphasizing the focus on who “owns” the language and gets to make the rules from the native speakers to all users of English. “If we think English is actually a global language, then we need to level things out so that those in the expanding circle and outer circle are not disadvantaged by the things they have trouble mastering,” says Kim.

In actuality, users of English manage to communicate quite effectively “through all these three circles,” says Kim. “Researchers have been finding common features that seem to indicate that when English is planted in another soil, similar pronunciation and grammatical simplification occurs.” Speakers seem to be able to sense what is essential about the language and what’s not important, but removing the perceived pressure to speak an arbitrarily “perfect” form of English may lend new speakers a dose of much-needed confidence. Language teachers tend to spend the most time on the hardest areas, which are often minor mistakes like article omissions and non-count pluralization. Realizing these small errors make no difference in how well speakers make themselves understood, “learners can be more confident in their ability to communicate,” says Kim.

After all, if English is a global language, shouldn’t all speakers feel that they own it? Unlike French, a previous lingua franca that has its own organization to moderate it, English has been changing and adapting ever since it first hit the British mainland. As English goes global, it has the potential to include all its speakers in the first circle and truly become the language of the world.