

# 5. Toward Employability in an Era of Globalization: The Need to Change Regional Communication Traits

by Beverly deGraw and Charles Patrick

## THE SITUATION

Human beings tend to look for similarities in things and people. We are especially good at discovering nuances in appearance or behavior and classifying people according to these traits. Unfortunately, assumptions are often made about an individual's ability to perform based on observed traits. Individuals are grouped in our minds with other persons who have exhibited similar traits. These traits often are of no value in predicting performance. When people engage in social interaction, they make assumptions about an individual first based on nonverbal cues and then on verbal cues. Each person carries a volume of stereotypical ideas that is first learned from family and then modified through experience. Assumptions are made and opinions formed about individuals based on matching the nonverbal and verbal cues with these preconceived stereotypical ideas. These assumptions then color the nature of our future interactions with that person. Some of the ways that we stereotype people are by gender, ethnic group, race, country of origin, hair color, dress, language, and accent.

Everyone has an accent. Accent can be defined as the words we use and the way we say them. In the United States, there is no standard dialect, but a generic, homogenized, Midwest newspeak is probably the most acceptable for those who represent business and industry to the public. This is the speech exemplified by many anchor persons and film personalities.

Accents do not usually have any adverse effect on individuals as long as they stay in the region where the accent was acquired. When a person goes to a different region, accent can become very noticeable. Stereotypical ideas about groups often enter into decisions on hiring and advancement within business and industry. Edwards (1979), in his summary of research by Hopper and Williams, stated that the nonstandard English-speaking candidate in a job interview is likely to be stereotyped as suitable for lower, more menial tasks.

Further, even though the nonstandard English speaker may be well qualified, his or her speech at the initial interview may effectively eliminate the opportunity to display these skills.

Hopper and Williams (1973) made it clear that employers make assumptions about a candidate's competence and intelligence based on the way he or she speaks. According to their research, standard English is an important factor in filling executive and supervisory positions. Further, Blakeney and MacNaughton (1971) found that negative information early in an employment interview often results in a negative decision. Einhorn, Bradley, and Baird (1982) stated that an effective interview is more important to the hiring decision than recommendations, previous experience, or grade point average.

One of the first things a visitor to Morehead State University may notice is that most students do not converse in Midwest anchor-person-newspeak. Regional forms of word usage, pronunciation, and accent are pervasive in speech, as evidenced in local radio broadcasts and newspapers. These regional forms of usage, sentence structure, and pronunciation, although common to much of the University's service region, will probably seem unusual to a first-time visitor from another geographic area.

A 1992 internal administrative study found that nearly half of the Morehead students from the service region seek and find employment outside the region. These students move out of the service region to seek employment typically in larger cities where companies offer positions in communications and business-related fields as well as in manufacturing, construction, electronics, and other technical fields. Additionally, many students accept teaching positions in other geographic areas. The accents and wording that students carry with them from the Appalachian region to other areas of the country may be met with some form of discrimination in the social arena and the work-

place. Business and industry in Kentucky and elsewhere continue to develop a global complexion as exemplified by Toyota of Georgetown, Lexmark of Lexington, and others. People of other nationalities, who work for or are otherwise involved with these enterprises, expect to converse in English that is basically free of regionalism.

Cincinnati, Ohio, is one city that recognized the detrimental effect that discrimination, based on dress and language, can have on opportunities for securing employment, housing, and services on equal basis with other citizens. In 1992, the city passed an ordinance that "outlaws discrimination in housing, employment, or public accommodations based on Appalachian origin" (Mead, 1994).

Many Morehead students use regional wording and accent, and for some, it is their first time away from home. Professors are in the interface between students and the workplace. If students retain their regional forms of speech, they may well be discriminated against in obtaining employment or advancing once in a job. This is especially true if the student seeks employment out of the area. The use of language is very important in job interview situations. Employers often have very definite ideas about the ways a person represents their company in terms of dress, talk, and presentation.

## THE NATURE OF THE INQUIRY

The foregoing discussion raised the following questions:

1. What are the effects of regional forms of speaking and writing on Morehead State University graduates as they enter job markets?
2. Are university faculty members aware of and concerned about the possible detrimental effects of this regional usage phenomena and are they attempting to address this issue in their teaching?

These questions and issues led to an investigation that set out to determine attitudes of faculty concerning student use of regional forms of wording and to

inquire what teaching methods were successful in changing student traits.

We wanted to (a) provide a comprehensive investigation of faculty pedagogical techniques that promote good communication skills and (b) generate an adequate database to ensure statistical significance of the research. A written survey was developed as the vehicle to accomplish the objectives. The survey evolved from a multiple-page, comprehensive document to a two-page survey. The majority of questions were designed to be answered by a standard number scale, while space was left for written comments on additional information to be provided by the survey respondents. The survey was reviewed by faculty from the curriculum areas of Industrial Technology, English, and Communications to ensure viability of survey question wording and meaning.

The survey was distributed to Morehead State University faculty through campus mail with a cover letter explaining the intent of the survey and the research. Within one month, 43% of the faculty (143 of 350) had returned completed surveys. The surveys were tallied and a statistical analysis performed on the results. The high return rate provided statistical significance and the ability to draw representative conclusions from the results.

## RESULTS

The following statements summarize the responses to the survey:

1. There is agreement by respondents that the use of regional wording forms and nonstandard grammar can be a barrier for graduates seeking employment within the Morehead State University service region. There was even stronger feeling that it can be a barrier outside the Morehead State University service region. A 1992 administrative study found that nearly one half of the Morehead students from the service region seek and find employment outside of the region. Companies in larger cities offer positions in communications and business-related fields as well as in manufacturing, construction, electronics, and other technical fields.
2. College faculty agreed to a high degree that they should set the example for students by modeling

generally accepted word usage and grammar.

3. Professors believe that correcting students publicly is not appropriate and that to do so can detract from class discussion and group interaction. Maintaining and enhancing student self-image and esteem is an important consideration here.
4. The data is equivocal as to whether or not students are under pressure from peers to change. By the same token, it is unclear if there is peer pressure to continue to use regional forms of wording. Since much of language is learned from the peer group, it is conceivable that there might be some pressure to use the language of that group.
5. There was a slight feeling among faculty that it is necessary to correct grammar but that regional accents may be overlooked.

Answers to questions about correcting oral communication showed that:

1. Clarifying was the most often used mode of correction. Practitioners of the whole language approach to instruction recommend this as an effective method of correction that allows the student to maintain self-esteem. Immediate correction is the least embarrassing for the student and it helps the student learn at the time of his or her error.
2. Some faculty overlook regional wording and grammar and choose not to correct at all. Some plausible and valid reasons were presented for this behavior in written comments. Most desired to maintain student willingness to contribute and valued content of the message over its form.

Responses concerned with correcting written communication show that:

1. Most correction is done through the writing process of students. Feedback is provided in various ways.
2. There is some feeling that professors consider it their duty to provide students with examples of good writing.
3. Professors expect correctness from themselves and from their students. They model desired behaviors in their written communication.
4. Most instructors say that they provide specific written feedback to students. Sometimes they expect stu-

dents to search out the corrections for themselves.

Several themes emerged from the respondents' written comments. The themes are presented, followed by representative comments (in italics).

Themes about methods for correcting oral communication:

Many faculty used direct instruction and others modeled desired behaviors. The following comment reflects the use of both techniques.

*In setting up an oral technical presentation, I emphasize the audience response factors including use of "standard American English," i.e., language that reflects generally agreed-upon standards of grammar and usage (but not pronunciation) for all native speakers of American English. And I demonstrate what I am talking about.*

*I use correct grammar myself and rephrase student comments in correct language when I can do so without embarrassing students. I think Morehead students have little self-confidence in their ability to speak and are unusually shy in the classroom. I work very hard at getting them to talk and try to do nothing that will discourage them from speaking freely.*

Some used a rephrase/restatement technique.

*Sometimes I state that the response is unclear, as opposed to grammatically incorrect, and ask for restatement.*

*I say, 'I think you mean . . . ' sometimes.*

Many used written comments or evaluations.

*I don't think there are good ways to correct oral grammar errors at the college level if it is done in front of other students. This may be done in writing privately to the individual student as part of a critique.*

One or two mentioned nonverbal techniques as exemplified by this comment.

*Blank stare.*

Some used no correction. While some indicated that they just did not correct oral usage, others said that they valued content over form.

*I don't concentrate on grammar as much as communication. I think there is a difference. People who use correct grammar all the time are sometimes seen as arrogant or pretentious. While grammar is important, it is only the*

form/function aspect of a larger phenomenon—communication. So, I concentrate more on the discourse itself than the form it takes.

These themes deal with methods for correcting written communication:

Again, many employed direct instruction.

*Teach proofreading skills, insist that they practice the skill, take off points for grammar error.*

Some comments indicated that instructors edited student writing.

*I frequently permit my students to submit drafts of formal papers. After making corrections, the papers are returned to students who are permitted to re-submit final form papers.*

*Much practice in writing—with feedback.*

Many gave the opportunity to revise work and resubmit it.

*Students are provided with 'unlimited' rewrite opportunities.*

Some used peer review techniques.

*I request the student and another person proofread the paper prior to submission for a grade.*

*In group learning activities, have other students on the team go over the write-up.*

Although there was almost universal agreement that humor was dangerous and should be avoided, we did receive

this last comment.

*I can't think of none write now.*

## HIGHLIGHTS

The following statements, although directed to faculty at Morehead State University, apply to all faculty in higher education, but particularly those in regional universities:

1. Accents and the use of words can trigger stereotypical thoughts in the minds of others.

2. If we use "standard English," our chances for employment and advancement in many job categories are improved.

3. Many Morehead students use regional wording and accents that may not serve them well in social and work settings, especially those that are remote from Appalachia.

4. Faculty, in general, agree that regional wording and grammar are important issues and should be addressed but without undue embarrassment to the student.

5. Faculty shared specific techniques that worked for them.

6. While working with students on this issue for years, many faculty felt that little noticeable progress had been made.

Faculty feel that students should use correct grammar and should modify

regional wording if they stay in this region and, especially, if they leave the region. They use modeling and clarifying techniques to achieve these objectives. In oral exchange, they use clarifying techniques. In written work, they are more directive in their approach. Morehead faculty react to grammar usage in a way similar to that of teachers at other universities. Faculty are hopeful that students will come to their classes able to speak and write in an acceptable way. That they do not perhaps indicates a need for more emphasis on speaking and writing across the university curriculum.

Accent and use of regional wording can be an indicator of geographic background, level of education, and socioeconomic status. People place individuals in stereotypical categories and make assumptions about their ability to complete tasks based on the way they talk. This phenomena can influence employment and advancement decisions in business and industry. These researchers set out to discover and actually found there was a significant level of concern for modifying the way students talk and write on the part of university faculty. This is an important issue for teachers to be aware of as they work to prepare students for success in the workplace.

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