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Bibliographic Essay and Specialized List

Fostering Language Diversity through Assessment Practices

“Standard English is…the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear, the speech of the Gullah, Yiddish, and so many other unremembered tongues” –bell hooks

When I first began my PhD studies, one of the projects I completed was researching a set of 19th century textbooks. These textbooks were aimed at an audience of African Americans who were not permitted to enroll in public schools. As Shirley Wilson Logan pointed out in her book Liberating Language, the editors of the collections were African American yet most of the contributors were white. The lessons of the book were absurd: repeatedly, the books preached that in order to end racism and discrimination African Americans needed to stop acting as they did and instead learn how to behave as whites. The problem, the books insinuated, was them—at a time when African Americans still did not have the right to vote fairly or own property.

It was easy to decipher the racist attitudes of the textbooks because they were written 150 years ago. The books explicitly stated that a lack of religion and education on the part of African Americans was the cause of racism, without acknowledging why African Americans had little access to education. Still, some version of these assumptions had to remain in our current teaching agendas. That in order to better oneself, one has to become like those who
discriminate against him or her. One of the most alarming trends echoing this sentiment is the movement for English Only in education. Increasing numbers of nonnative speakers in the classroom has given way to the notion that in order to be patriotic you must speak flawless, accent free English. “ESL” has become a label that implies students are weak writers and speakers and only grammatical drills can help them become better writers. And it’s not just nonnative speakers. Dialects differing from standard academic English are seen as inferior and a mark of ignorance.

Monolingualism—promoting standard academic English as a privileged discourse—often manifests itself in the composition classroom through assessment. Instructors who mean well champion standard academic English at the expense of holistic, formative feedback that balances discussion of syntax and rhetorical features. As Cummings et. al, proves, the more sentence-level issues present in a student’s essay the less likely that student is to receive feedback on rhetorical features. As I’ve spoken with other instructors at conferences, I’ve learned that many instructors feel helpless when it comes to working with nonnative speakers and speakers of dialects. I do not believe that a lack of understanding in how to work with nonnative speakers equals racism; rather, most instructors just don’t know what to do because of little teacher training in this area. I’m still learning, as well. Many feel that the best thing to do is send the student to the writing center to solve the “problem.” I hope that my research will better inform and empower teachers in how to create a classroom that honors language diversity. Teachers should have opportunities to learn how to design rubrics and other means of assessment and put an end to what Trimbur and Horner call the “tacit policy of monolingualism”. My research questions guiding this assignment are: How can we design rubrics and other means of classroom-based assessment that not only accommodate, but foster
language diversity? How can we use assessment to combat English only attitudes, rather than to enforce them? By promoting language diversity, we seek to lessen the implication that students’ home languages (which even native speakers have) are somehow deficient. While it’s not realistic within a university setting to abandon standard academic English, there are practices that teachers can adhere to that promote best pedagogical standards regarding respecting students’ languages.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication took a stand on the issue in 1974 when it issued “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language.” Even thirty-seven years later, many writing courses are still taught by teachers trained in literature. The problem with this is, according to the resolution, that teachers are unaware of the connection of speech and writing. The resolution adds, “Many of us have taught as though there existed somewhere a single American "standard English" which could be isolated, identified, and accurately defined” (3). This notion, which John Trimbur and Bruce Horner argue leads to a “tacit policy of English Only” (622) puts students who do not write in “standard English”—something that does not and cannot exist—at a disadvantage in the classroom. The resolution connects standard language to power and notes that the language of those without power is unfairly judged. Like the resolution, Trimbur and Horner’s piece, titled ““English Only and U.S. College Composition” is foundational to my research. It’s rare to find a piece published since this work that does cite the authors’ claims. The authors call for composition instructors to better address language diversity in the classroom.

Several of Trimbur’s essays have informed my work thus far. He provides a history of multilingualism in the US in his essay, “Linguistic Memory and the Politics of U.S. English,” arguing that there have always been unspoken English Only policies in place since colonization.
Trimbur, like many who criticize English Only policies, point out that those today who believe that Spanish-speaking in America should be limited are similar to those who rallied against German-speaking a hundred years ago. Both groups were hostile to immigrants and extended this to language policy. He provides a quote from Benjamin Franklin discussing Germans:

“Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs…” (580)

Benjamin Franklin tied identity to language in the same way that the rhetoric of the English Only movement establishes that in order to be a good American, one has to speak flawless English. It’s this continual “language forgetting” of our nation that causes monolingualism, Trimbur writes, manifesting itself in our composition classes where instructors unknowingly perpetuate this myth.

The privileging of academic English leads to unfair assessment practices for nonnative speakers and speakers of “nonstandard” dialects. Alister Cummings, a TESOL scholar, analyzes in “Decision Making While Ratings ESL/EFL Writing Tasks” how assessors scored ESOL writing. They found that assessors spent more time discussing rhetorical textual features only if there were fewer grammatical mistakes; otherwise, rhetorical features were discussed little. This is problematic because if assessors rate writing based on its “appearance” (meaning, absence of grammatical errors) then ESOL students are not getting the attention to rhetorical features that they deserve. I’d like to find a similar study done with a native English speaking teacher instructing a FYC course. Although Cummings is a TESOL scholar, I feel it is important to bridge the gap between TESOL and composition since both fields deal with issues in language diversity. As Paul Kei Matsuda describes in “Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A
Disciplinary Division of Labor” there needs to be more conversations bridging the two fields. Thus, I’d like to continue Cummings work from a first-year composition instructor to examine instructor and students’ attitudes toward writing assessment.

As part of my bridging studies in TESOL and first-year composition, I assume that all students are speakers of dialects, yet some “nontraditional” dialects are at a disadvantage in the first-year writing classroom. I have struggled in my research as to whether to identify African American English as a dialect since some scholars claim that it’s unfair to label all African Americans as having the same dialect (in the same way that we need to understand that all nonnative speakers do not have the same dialect). Studies in African American dialects are important to include when writing about honoring language diversity and the ways that assessment has negatively impacted those without power. To this end, in “Holdin’ It Down: Students' Right and the Struggle over Language Diversity,” Keith Gilyard rebukes the claim that standard English is the only language of educated peoples. Gilyard’s piece is especially worthwhile in that it outlines arguments of those who believe that Ebonics is “ruining” English. He discusses a speech by Professor Stix, who criticizes the Linguistic Society of America’s 1997 pro-Ebonics resolution, where Stix asks, “Can one then do physics and philosophy in Ebonics? Please.” Gilyard replies, “It is a particular verbal barb given the fact that indeed one can do physics and philosophy in Ebonics or any other language variety” (116). Gilyard has quite a sense of humor in this essay, declaring “Stix is for kids” (117). This attitude of negativity toward African American dialects has the potential, Gilyard claims, to promote “humiliating consciousness” (119). Regardless of whether one feels it is acceptable to label any one dialect as African American, Gilyard’s writing is essential to the field of language diversity as his work shows the vast amounts of institutional discrimination facing those who identity as a
speaker of African American English. While we should acknowledge African American English as an acceptable dialect, we should also acknowledge that it is a socialized dialect. In his essay “Your Average Nigga,” Ashanti Vershawn Young builds upon Gilyard’s justification for African American English but also argues that the label of Black English Vernacular can imply that in order to be a masculine, African American one must speak in a specific dialect. Young recalls that as an African American male and teacher of first-year composition, he often felt that he was labeled and as a result expected to speak or write a certain way. The author recalls that he never felt like he belonged to any group that he was a part of; thus, he felt instructors should not privilege any dialect over another, but instead accept and accommodate all dialects. Young’s research is important because it reminds us to avoid categorizing any language as endemic to any given student population. I strive to avoid perpetuating that myth in my research.

Still, while dialects are socialized, so are our notions of what makes good writing. Similar to Gilyard, “Writin’ da Funk Dealer: Songs of Reflections and Reflex/shuns” by Kelvin Monroe gives a first-hand account of the author’s experiences with racism in the writing classroom. This source could be an interesting classroom reading or an exercise for instructors participating in a workshop on language diversity. Monroe code-switches from what is traditionally considered African American English to academic English, recounting the same issue in both sections—the racism he felt directed at him in college as an African American student. Melvin’s use of personal experiences is also an example of feminist approach to the topic. Like Melvin, Victor Villanueva’s work also deals with personal experience. The personal experiences shared by these authors remind us that this is happening to our students as well as our professors and colleagues. Issues in language diversity so often relate to one’s personal identity and self-worth.
While there is substantial research involving dialects in the first-year composition classroom, fewer works deal explicitly with race and assessment. One major contributor to this field is Asao B. Inoue. Inoue claims in “Racial Methodologies for Composition” that race should be a factor in assessment validity. Considering the results of Cummings et al.’s study, which shows that those writing in dialects receive less feedback on rhetorical features, it seems that students who write in nonstandard English lack the same quality of feedback as their peers. I highly agree with Inoue in that more needs to be done in examining how race factors into assessment. I also appreciated that Inoue clarified that ignorance of best pedagogical practices does not necessarily equal racism: “It should be noted that “racist” or “racism” does not refer to the attitudes, behaviors, or intentions of agents around assessments. The terms refer to the social outcomes and arrangements from assessments, and/or the methods used to produce assessment results and decisions” (publication TBA). Inoue’s work asks instructors to acknowledge our differences and biases in assessment and design new technologies that benefit not only diverse student populations but all student populations.

Prior to Inoue, Catherine Pendergrast’s 1998 essay “Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies” also calls for race to be studied as a factor in the composition classroom. While Pendergrast focuses more on issues of critical race theory and stays away from explicitly explaining race as a factor in assessment, she does repeat Min Zhan-Lu’s critique of Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations for its lack of discussion of race. Pendergrast’s purpose in writing the piece is to remind composition teachers that “The present challenge for compositionists is to develop theorizations of race that do not reinscribe people of color as either foreign or invisible, nor leave whiteness uninvestigated” (51). This is an important note for my research because it reminds me to be sensitive to the experiences of my students, but to
also avoid “othering” my research participants. Pendergrast’s work is also considered a landmark essay in the field of whiteness studies, which analyzes how whiteness is typically the perceived norm. Typically, this manifests itself in our teaching pedagogies by our assuming that our students are white.

A recurrent theme throughout my bibliography is the importance of teacher training in language diversity. My addition to this field of literature is that much of this training needs to be in assessment. I hope that my dissertation can help answer questions about what best practices instructors should follow, giving instructors who may feel helpless in this area a sense of empowerment. In “The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition,” Paul Kei Matsuda argues that, despite the pressing need, few graduate composition programs offer coursework on issues in ESOL or language diversity. Writing programs assume that students are native speakers of English despite the increasing presence of nonnative speakers. The “good writing” we want students to produce is that which shows no features of second language writing. Matsuda is an important addition to my bibliography as he’s one of the few language diversity scholars who works both in TESOL and first-year composition.

We need to create writing assessment practices that focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. Writing from the perspective of a Writing Program Administrator, Susan K. Miller-Cochran’s “Language Diversity and the Responsibility of the WPA” details five assumptions WPAs make about second language writers and possible ways to implement a language diverse FYC curriculum. These are that “second language writers are easy to identify”; “second language writers are a small minority”; “as long as you have a second language writing specialist at your school, that person can handle any challenges that students might face”; “second language students can just be placed in a class, and then you don’t have to worry about
them anymore”; “second language writers need to focus on grammatical issues more than rhetorical ones” (215). These assumptions are important to point out because they guide so much of our current views on what nonnative students need in terms of assessment. There seems to be a pattern of exclusion when it comes to dealing with nonnative speakers: send them to the writing center, send them to the segregated ESOL course, or move them to a basic writing classroom. By clearing up misconceptions, we can begin to think about how these misconceptions have guided our unsatisfactory pedagogical practices.

Also from the perspective of a WPA is “Preparing for the Tipping Point: Designing Writing Programs to Meet the Needs of the Changing Population” where Ana Maria Preto-Bay and Kristine Hansen claim that FYC was once the practice of teachers exercising “their students in the production of formally correct writing that could be graded with relative speed, on the assumption that correctness would be prime desideratum…” (41) and that this model is outdated and does not acknowledge the changing classroom. The problem with this is that what teachers may assume is sloppy writing could actually be the result of a student not knowing a grammatical rule in English. The rules of English do not always align with the grammatical rules of other languages, so we should talk about and educate students on these differences so that students do not feel like their teachers are labeling them as careless.

When we design assessment technologies that uphold this “tacit policy of English Only” (Trimbur) we not only lengthen students’ path to success we may unknowingly attack a student’s personal identity through criticizing his or her language. Monolingual attitudes in the classroom may lead native and nonnative speakers alike to feel that they have to change their cultural heritage in order to become a more successful student. Gail Shuck argues in “Combating Monolingualism: A Novice Administrator’s Challenge” that administrators need to
review their own pedagogical practices in light of “English Only” policies that force political
tensions upon educators. She discusses Boise State University—a school some might think does
not need a language diverse curriculum—but that actually has 8% of its student body made up
of second language writers (60). Schuck also make the important point that instructors and
administrators need to think about who they determine as “ESL” as many students who are
labeled as such do not belong in a traditional ESL classroom and instead could function well in
a native speaker classroom. I appreciated that Shuck studied a school that proves all universities
need to encourage language diversity, not just urban institutions.

This project assumes that all students are speakers of dialects who must learn the dialect
of academic English. Shirley Wilson Logan echoes the claims of previous authors stating that
most students don’t even realize that they speak a dialect, thinking that nonstandard English is
something that who are uneducated or possess little knowledge of English speak. She gives an
example of her composition instructor’s workshop, where she asks new teachers to raise their
hands if they speak a dialect. When no one does, Logan points out that everyone should have.
She suggests that those who train graduate students for teaching first-year composition ask
students to collect examples of vernacular writing that they encounter in a given week as a
method of opening up the conversation about what it means to speak standard English. By not
providing this training in language diversity, we perpetuate a culture of monolingualism.

Even before students arrive in our college composition courses, they are greatly affected
by state-mandated English Only policies in the K – 12 classroom. In Linda Christensen’s
work “Language and Power” from her book Teaching for Joy and Justice, she argues that
“linguistic genocide” prevents students from appreciating not only their language heritages, but
their cultural heritages, as the two are inseparable: “English Only laws in many states have
banned Spanish and other languages from some classrooms. Ebonics was used as fodder for racist jokes after the Oakland School Board proposed teaching Ebonics. Native American languages were decimated in boarding schools during a time when ‘Kill the Indian, Save the Man’ directives gave straightforward instructions to teachers” (209). I felt Christensen’s work was important to study because it may help explain the impact of mandatory English Only in writing classes and bridge the gap between the study of high school language arts and college composition.

These sources are important contributions to the field, detailing our failure to accommodate and foster language diversity in our teaching practices. Nonnative speakers of English and speakers of dialects are at risk for less comprehensive feedback and assessment in addition to having their identities questioned by our current pedagogies. I plan to review additional writings by Noam Chomsky, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Foucault’s writings on power and language to add to this list as foundational texts. I hope to continue to find sources that explicitly deal with issues of race and assessment. Assessment should be an opportunity for a student’s growth as a writer rather than a source of whitewashing. I feel passionately about the topic and as Liz Rohan wrote we need to write about topics that we love. As I complete my dissertation and enter the job market, I hope to be seen as a scholar who seeks to professionalize underrepresented areas in composition studies. Basic writing, TESOL, language diversity, and adult literacy are traditionally seen as areas belonging to the community college but our universities are changing and composition scholars should as well. Universities have an obligation to best serve their students, and to do this, we need to stop imagining our classrooms as young, white, native speakers of English.
Bibliography


“Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” *College Composition and Communication*, Fall, 1974, Vol. XXV. Web.


