2012

Re-Visioning "Right" Writing in the Language Arts Classroom

Lucia Elden
Mid Michigan Community College

Marilyn Wilson
Michigan State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Elden, Lucia and Wilson, Marilyn (2012) "Re-Visioning "Right" Writing in the Language Arts Classroom," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1900>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Lucia Elden and Marilyn Wilson

Re-Visioning “Right” Writing in the Language Arts Classroom

Teacher educators *can* help pre-service teachers respect the complexity and diversity of language, and new teachers *can* teach writing *and* grammar. This statement shouldn’t be all that provocative. Even in the 21st century with its retro-focus on standardization, the traditional teaching of grammar doesn’t need to be front and center. And yet when LAJM’s call for manuscripts about the role of grammar instruction in the classroom went out, each of us separately wondered about why some of these questions were still being asked: Do students learn grammar through daily error-finding exercises? Do lessons in traditional topics such as subject/verb agreement transfer to student writing? And...what IS grammar?

Research studies have been providing perspectives on these questions for years. “Grammar,” as it is used by the general public and therefore by our students and their parents, usually means standard usage rules and writing conventions. Grammar, as linguists use it, refers to the set of highly complex rules that govern all language use—rules that operate mostly beneath the level of consciousness and that vary from one community to another. Applied linguists haven’t made much headway in getting people to understand the distinction between these definitions, and so grammar stubbornly persists as a set of prescriptive do’s and don’ts for written and oral language.

Whether grammar is assumed to mean how the language is structured or how speakers and writers are “supposed” to use the language, the research over the past 60 years quite persistently raises questions about traditional assumptions that speakers and writers will apply the rules they’ve studied to their own speaking and writing. The research has more or less proven that this transfer rarely occurs (Hillocks, 1986; Weaver, 1979). Our purpose here is not to review all the past research but rather to suggest alternative ways for teachers to help speakers and writers understand the variation and flexibility inherent in all communicative discourse.

We want to be clear that we are not arguing that language study for its own sake is never useful or that a conscious knowledge of some prescriptive rules isn’t sometimes beneficial, especially in some genres. And understanding the complexity of grammatical structures can provide a developing awareness of those structures in our own writing. But we argue that teacher

educators can help young teachers push back against the resurgence of an old narrative about language that quantifies and simplifies it in its teaching and assessment. In addition, we believe that language *doing* rather than merely language *studying*—is likely to have more long-lasting effects on language understanding and use.

We begin with Lucia’s experience as a student-teacher in a high school classroom in Texas. Armed with knowledge about the complexity and diversity of language from courses like Marilyn’s *Introduction to Language* at Michigan State University, Lucia is an example of how new teachers can apply theories of reading, writing and language into classroom practices that honor linguistic diversity and promote linguistic flexibility.

Lucia writes:

Most people assume that English teachers become English teachers because they love literature or are good at writing. For me, it was the language part of the discipline, the beauty and complexity of language acquisition, the variety of dialects that comprise “English,” and the joy of complicating the simplistic notion of “standard” English.

Although I knew little about African American culture as I headed to this mixed-race high school, I was assigned a 9th grade English class whose curriculum was dominated by the study of grammar, with some literature thrown in wherever it could fit. When I started teaching on the second day, I began with students’ writing, not with grammar study. My supervising teacher, a commanding African American woman, commented to other teachers, “Lucia is going to teach writing before she teaches grammar. Imagine that!”

Like many teachers at the time, my supervising teacher’s own teaching had been predominantly grammar based, with a focus on standard English. Her own speech occasionally included African American language forms, but her pedagogical stance was to provide students with standard English to meet the demands of the educational system. Her intent was to replace “home” dialect patterns with those of a more standardized English in the classroom. Any appreciation she had of students’ language patterns was usually overridden by her felt need to enforce standard English.

Wilson’s course had helped me see that there were many “acceptable” grammars of English and that Standard English grammar was neither superior to other dialects of English nor

necessary as “basic” to the process of writing. And grammar was not effectively learned in isolation. I went into the classroom believing my students could write regardless of whether they wrote “right.” Despite the thinking skills workbooks, the lesson plans with numbers to validate the objectives that were demonstrated, and the testing culture of Texas—I was determined to let students express themselves in their own language instead of positioning their language in opposition to standard English. In my role as a basketball and track coach, I observed them switching from their informal English forms on the playing field to more formal structures in the classroom.

An even greater appreciation of their language came from the literature that my students introduced me to that I had not read as an undergraduate. I began learning about Langston Hughes’ and Lucille Clifton’s poetry; about the rhythms of other dialects through the dialogue in movies like *Purple Rain* and *The Color Purple*; and eventually the beauty of other language patterns through the writings of Sandra Cisneros and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Despite the differences between my background and theirs, between my own rural background and their urban experiences, we learned together.

I saw my students’ language as valuable, and I was convinced that students’ right to their own languages, including in some of their writing assignments, was an important part of language arts instruction. From the very beginning, the principles I’d learned as an undergraduate student gave me the confidence to work with the diverse language patterns of my students.

We have begun with Lucia’s experience as a student teacher because it demonstrates both that teacher educators *can* make a difference by teaching these multiple perspectives on “grammar” and that beginning teachers can leverage their language studies as they move into the classroom.

Emerging from the sociolinguistic studies of researchers like Geneva Smitherman, Walt Wolfram, William Labov, and Lisa Delpit, among others, the following principles continue to anchor current discussions of language in the classroom:

- Language choices are always made within the context of a specific discourse community, with specific rhetorical considerations.
- Language is never just “words” or grammatical structures. It’s a way of thinking, a set of cultural beliefs, a view of the world, central to the speaker’s identity.
- Language is neither neutral nor passive; it is inherently political.
- All dialects of a language operate with rules that govern their use, and all dialects are equally complex and capable of a range of expressive and intellectual functions.

- First languages or dialects are acquired by language use in natural communicative contexts, not by direct instruction.

The goal of reframing language study based on these principles is to heighten students’ awareness of language variations and their expressive and intellectual legitimacies, and to develop self-awareness of their own verbal dexterity as they use language to negotiate social situations. By variation, therefore, we mean both the rule systems of various dialects of English and the variations that exist as speakers/writers verbally shift gears from one audience or purpose to another.

Language is effective when it is used to meet the needs of speakers/writers within a particular socio-cultural context. Dialects that have often been marginalized and deemed “ungrammatical” are, of course, fully developed, rule-governed linguistic systems

(Smitherman, 2006; Wolfram et al., 1999). Speakers of these dialects usually develop over time an increasing ability to code-switch, which is the process of moving back and forth between non-dominant dialect patterns and more standard forms or between one language and another. Immigrants, for example, may for a period of time speak a variety of English that uses both first and second language features. Students who operate with both a dominant dialect and a non-dominant dialect of English can also move from one to the other as a response to a bicultural identity (McWhorter, 2000), using linguistic variants as a way to negotiate the socio-cultural terrain.

At the same time, speakers of all dialects vary their own linguistic registers—what we call style-shifting—where issues of audience, purpose, and style come into play. Essentially, language *in situ*. When linguistic standardization rather than flexibility becomes the goal of instruction, a “communicative disconnect” occurs between speakers’ fluid, variable uses of language and the rigidity of “standardized” English (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009, p. 3).

Speakers recognize this disconnect intuitively as they shift their own language patterns from one situation to another.

Every day kids make decisions in their oral language about what will work or not work with different audiences—parents, friends, bullies, teachers, youth groups, sports teams, cops, pastors. Most code-switching or style-shifting is done unconsciously—an ability developed not by learning the social/linguistic rules formally but by using them in authentic situations. Sometimes their linguistic moves are more conscious. They know they can use slang and taboo words with close friends but not in the classroom or with their grandparents; they try to adjust their

The goal of reframing language study based on these principles is to heighten students’ awareness of language variations and their expressive and intellectual legitimacies, and to develop self-awareness of their own verbal dexterity as they use language to negotiate social situations.

Language is effective when it is used to meet the needs of speakers/writers within a particular socio-cultural context.

grammar when making class presentations more so than when talking informally in classroom discussions.

Much of this discussion has been on oral language. The question under consideration here is whether students see possibilities for communicative flexibility in their writing as well. Written language has been taught in most cases within the framework of a “standard” that is perceived to be both more formal and more “correct” than oral language. The same flexibility with which speakers participate in conversation is not

Most code-switching or style-shifting is done unconsciously—an ability developed not by learning the social/linguistic rules formally but by using them in authentic situations.

often encouraged in written communication. Students in writing classes often see writing as a singular school genre needing to be “rule”-dominated and “correct,” where code-switching isn’t acceptable and style-shifting not often acknowledged. These rhetorical moves may be easier to make in oral language where the language situations are likely to be authentic, with immediate feedback. Classroom writing, on the other hand, is often less authentic, with the teacher or the ACT test as the primary audience. When teachers, however, value the variability and flexibility of their students’ language, writing instruction can begin to encourage the rhetorical moves that give language its life.

Writing as Possibility Rather Than as Prohibition

At issue is how teachers can take advantage of students’ natural linguistic abilities to make them more self-aware of their language and to help them revalue the literacies they already possess. We call for pedagogies in which students engage in multiple writing styles and genres for a range of audiences and in which the concept of “rhetorically effective” writing supplants the notion of “correct” writing. Young writers need to play with language in a risk-free environment and come to know that static “right” writing is a myth. Rhetorically successful writing allows for greater variability of structure and style that reflect the audience and purpose. It acknowledges that code-switching and style-shifting are strengths that writers possess, and it encourages experimentation with language forms and structures: written language as possibility rather than as prohibition.

In the following discussion we provide an assignment sequence that Lucia uses with her students. These assignments provide examples of how students can grapple with language as possibility rather than as prohibition by considering a range of dialect variations and experimenting with rhetorical variations in their writing. In the end, we offer an example of an inquiry-based approach for helping students learn about writing conventions.

At Mid Michigan Community College, Lucia has been teaching Freshman Composition to dual enrolled high school students for several years. Even though students develop a departmentally-assessed portfolio, Lucia provides numerous opportunities for them to practice writing flexibility through a variety of projects. First of all, students choose an article

from the course anthology *Composing Knowledge: Readings for College Writers* to “review” for their classmates. Many of the articles in the text offer perspectives on language: Barbara Melix’s and bell hooks’ reflections on code switching and using AAE effectively in some settings, Perri Klass’ narrative on learning to use medical language, and academics such as David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, who problematize language use in the classroom. These perspectives provide some “language” for discussion throughout the semester.

Questions like these form the nexus of discussions:

- Does this grammatical structure work in this context, and why or why not?
- Is the language as written authentic?
- How does the writer use code-switching within the dialogue and to what effect? Is it rhetorically successful, and why or why not?
- How do we define rhetorical “success” in this context and who gets to define it?
- Do the kinds of choices we make in oral language also occur in written language?
- How are different language patterns representational of different cultures and experiences?

Many of the above questions address the specific linguistic choices students make and the reasons for those choices.

Secondly, students annotate and rhetorically analyze their chosen article and study the review genre, both academic reviews and magazine or online reviews. The first review they write is an informal review, which includes rhetorical choices that would suit this

audience—visuals, questions, fragments, slang, catchy word choice or anecdotes—for the purpose of getting their classmates interested in reading the article (or at least the review). Students

post their reviews on the online course shell, so the “attention-getting” features are put to the test. Students then reply to each other, critiquing their reviews.

Next, students write a lengthy academic review of the same article, using documentation, developed paragraphs, formal voice and language in which they may use different rhetorical structures: more complex syntax and vocabulary expected for academic texts. Finally, as students develop a multi-source essay on a “learning” problem they have, they choose several of the articles to synthesize. As part of the drafting process, they create a dialogue in the form of a talk show.

The following is an excerpt from high school junior Kimberlee’s dialogue in which she addresses the issue of teacher quality and its impact on student learning. The dialogue allows for a variety of rhetorical structures, styles of language, and vocabulary use. Kimberlee, (a pseudonym) an African American student, uses AAE language patterns in the dialogue, along with code-switching to more standard forms. As an example

At issue is how teachers can take advantage of students’ natural linguistic abilities to make them more self-aware of their language and to help them revalue the literacies they already possess.

of Kimberlee's increasing awareness of different rhetorical structures, Kimberlee writes in standard English in a number of her other assignments because the professors who will read her portfolio have "standard" language assumptions. The dialogue below, however, was written for classmates and represents her attempts to create language patterns for alternative contexts.

Welcome to big mama live on AT (Africa Talk)

Today's show will be talking about how it is hard for students to learn from certain teachers. We will be talking with bell hooks, student in learning Kimberlee, Usher who sings about love, Paulo Freire, and Mike Rose. Enjoy our talk today people!

Student Kimberlee: Students tend to have da most troubles wit teachers because dey either is judgmental of them or sometimes don't push themselves to learn.

Usher: Now there is a confession, us people must say and dat is most kids tend to sometimes pay attention but the teacher doesn't teach very well.

Mike Rose: Well some of that is true but do you really think it is just because of how they teach? It could be how the students' environment is around them and dat's why it is hard for them.

Student Kimberlee: so Mike Rose, you believe that it can be revolved around how students are brought up...well have you thought about how students comprehend and how paying attention can be a factor?

Freire: Actually I would like to speak in his behalf and that is because he doesn't always know wat he be talking bout. Anyways students have to be considered as learning in progress

not just a tool and told and explained too as reality. Most teachers don't even know halve of what they be talkin bout so how do they expect students to pay attention and want to learn?

As a writer representing oral dialogue, as an African American student code-switching between and within characters, and as a writer grappling with various registers and styles, Kimberlee uses forms of language that may not be accurately representational, but the process of negotiating these difficult linguistic registers and social terrains is how she learns to do it successfully.

Kimberlee's dialogue is interesting in

its attempt to move between AAE forms and more standard forms. Her dialogue is, of course, a written record of an oral discourse—which is in itself difficult to negotiate. She uses forms of direct address, "well" as an interjection usually used in only oral discourse, and a spelling convention to represent AAE pro-

nunciation patterns such as "dat" and "talkin." Kimberlee is not always consistent in her use of language to represent formal vs. informal or to illustrate different registers or styles. But her attempts suggest an awareness of what some of these variations are. For example, she uses informal vocabulary "kids" for Usher, more formal "students" for Rose and Freire, which seem appropriate for these dialogue participants. Some of Kimberlee's code-switching between characters is deliberate, other choices may be unconscious. But she is learning the rhetorical moves in language that occur as the social context suggests. The talk show format allows for "experts" using more formal registers and other folks using more informal speech. The talk show format, a genre with which most students are very familiar, is ideal for this experimentation with language and with the ideas they're studying.

Kimberlee's representation of Friere's speech is particularly noteworthy. She represents Friere as using AAE habitual be ("they be talkin about"). Interestingly, Kimberlee, the student persona in the dialogue, also uses AAE phonology and a common agreement rule ("dey either is judgmental of them...") While it is easy to speculate about her use of AAE for the student persona, we'd be curious to know why she selected these patterns for Friere: does she see Friere as less traditionally academic than Mike Rose and more aligned with students because of his philosophy?

As a writer representing oral dialogue, as an African American student code-switching between and within characters, and as a writer grappling with various registers and styles, Kimberlee uses forms of language that may not be accurately representational, but the process of negotiating these difficult linguistic registers and social terrains is how she learns to do it successfully. Kimberlee is experimenting with dialect patterns, rhetorical issues of audience, socio-economic class, and degrees of formality—all within an oral genre she is trying to represent in writing. Complicated, indeed! In a later paper focused on this topic, Kimberlee uses more conventional standard English throughout. In the synthesis paper, which students submit in their portfolio, Kimberlee uses formal, academic rhetorical features.

Admittedly, this assignment sequence is not a new idea. For example, June Jordan's (1988) classroom made "translations" of Alice Walker's character Celie in *The Color Purple* into standard English or of a dialogue between Nora and Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into what Jordan calls "Black English." It also doesn't integrate debate about local community issues, as in Jordan's class, about which language to use as students write to a police officer after a classmate's brother is killed by the police. But it does offer students some practice and understanding that language use is flexible, and perhaps equally important, a chance to play with language, to give their languages voice.

Using one piece of writing and revising it for varying audiences works as well with rural students as it does with urban, as Lucia has discovered in her work with English fifth to twelfth grade teachers in a rural mid-Michigan school.

During the writing of both the article review for classmates and the talk show dialogue that pulls several pieces of research together, Lucia and the students talk about issues of language attitudes, language stereotyping, and language bias as they negotiate different genres and write for different audiences. She also discusses with them the works of Sherman Alexie, Amy Tan, Jared Diamond, Deborah Tannen and others, discussing language patterns and ideas on language in other cultures and discourse communities.

Using one piece of writing and revising it for varying audiences works as well with rural students as it does with urban, as Lucia has discovered in her work with English fifth to twelfth grade teachers in a rural mid-Michigan school. Helping young writers become more conscious of their own linguistic choices that are dependent on the social context (participating in classroom discussions versus hanging out with friends, texting peers versus emailing teachers) makes language choices more immediate. After Kimberlee and her classmates complete their academic synthesis essay, they examine their rhetorical choices in a critical reflection piece which also goes into their portfolio. They explain the language and source choices that enhance their credibility, their organization and revision choices, and how the process helped their own learning.

Inquiry and the Deconstruction/Discovery of "Language Rules"

One opportunity of assignments like these is the discovery of underlying patterns of language. Experimentation with language features is part of an inquiry-based approach in which students analyze their own linguistic choices, the rationale for those choices, and the choices of other writers. As an extended way of studying grammar structure, students and teachers can systematically analyze the patterns of writing conventions and grammatical forms not only in the texts they write but in the texts they read. This approach to grammar study—or what we would like to call language study—expands our understanding of language rather than reducing it to mere grammar drills or error hunts.

Uncovering patterns can be accomplished without memorizing or skill-and-drill exercises—and it can be done at all grade levels. For example, fifth grade teacher Elizabeth Schlessman (2011) uses an inquiry process with children's books. Here she muses aloud with her students about the use of commas:

I wanted students to notice [punctuation] marks and ask open-ended questions, so I decided to start by modeling inquiry from question to application in one anchor lesson. I began by modeling an I-notice-and-now-I-wonder process. I chose a model sentence and question that would make the inquiry process accessible to students at all levels of reading and English language learning: "I was reading *Chicken Sunday*," I said, "and I noticed this sentence: 'When we passed Mr. Kodinski's hat shop, Miss Eula would always stop and look in the window at the wonderful hats.' Now I am wondering about the comma. Here is my question: Is there always a

comma in the middle when a sentence starts with when?"

I wrote the example sentence and question on the board. Then I asked, "Can you find any other examples that follow the same pattern?" (p. 35)

And the students then go about finding other examples from the books they're reading in class—Jerry Spinnelli's *Maniac Magee*, Patricia Palacco's *Chicken Sunday*—comparing patterns, coming up with comma generalizations. In the process students generate other inquiry questions about language, and they're off and running in pursuit of grammar generalizations and usage rules. The following is Schlessman's rationale:

I wanted my students to know that there were patterns beyond—and exceptions to—the rules they already knew. I wanted them to trust their own thinking to reason about those patterns. Even if we ended up discovering the so-called "rules," I wanted students to start from a place of inquiry and empowerment. I wanted them to see that placing punctuation on the page is a decision-making process and that the teacher or the textbook and the "rules" created by others can be questioned. (p. 34-35)

As Schlessman admits, this kind of language study in order to draw attention to punctuation rules and usage rules is certainly not "efficient," but it provides a way for students to own their learning, to understand that the language of writing is a negotiating process, much like their oral language is. Students may not realize it, but they are considering the ideologies of language and the power relations that exist in those ideologies (Godley & Minnici, 2008). Instead of having the rules thrust upon them, they discover and deeply learn language patterns and practices.

As Schlessman admits, this kind of language study in order to draw attention to punctuation rules and usage rules is certainly not "efficient," but it provides a way for students to own their learning, to understand that the language of writing is a negotiating process, much like their oral language is.

Although Schlessman doesn't discuss student writing in her article, we can imagine that this inquiry process can provide ways for students to think about the language decisions they make in a full range of speaking and writing genres. As we all know, there is variety in language and flexibility in different genres, and our mission as language arts teachers is to share with our students the wonder of language inherent in its variability and function.

Reimagining the English Language Arts

As teachers we can harness the linguistic survival skills and intelligence our students already possess and make them aware of their own linguistic power in both writing and speech. No one is arguing that "Students' Right to Their Own Language,"

(CCCC, 1974) absolves teachers of the responsibility for addressing standard forms of language. We ARE arguing, however, for a pedagogy that acknowledges the flexibility of language use and the legitimacy of language varieties that give all speakers and writers voice. That legitimacy is possible only when students understand their own linguistic power. With linguistic flexibility comes greater control of a variety of forms, including standard English. Canagarajah (2003) perhaps states it best:

Rather than teaching rules in a normative way, we should teach strategies—creative ways to negotiate the norms operating in diverse contexts. Rather than developing mastery in a “target language,” we should strive for competence in a repertoire of codes and discourses. Rather than simply joining a speech community, we should teach students to shuttle between communities. (p. xiii)

What better way to teach for expectations of standard language use than by providing strategies for language negotiation among a range of speech communities. Offering kids options and opportunities to make language choices—imagine that!

References

- Canagarajah, S. (2003). Forward. In G. Smitherman and V. Villanueva (Eds.) *Language diversity in the classroom: From intention to practice*. The Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press. ix-xiv.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(3), 280-298.
- Dyson, A. H., & Smitherman, G. (2009). The right (write) start: African American language and the discourse of sounding right. *Teachers College Record*, 111, 973-998.
- Godley, A. & Minnici, A. (2008). Critical language pedagogy in an urban high English Class. *Urban Education* 43.3, 319-346.
- Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research on written composition: New directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Jordan, J. (1988). Nobody mean more to me than you and the future life of Willie Jordan. *Harvard Educational Review*. 58(3), 363-374.
- Labov, W. (1972). The logic of nonstandard English. In W. Labov (Ed.), *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular* (pp. 201-240). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McWhorter, J. (2000). *Spreading the word: Language and dialect in America*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Norgaard, R., Ed. (2007). *Composing knowledge: Readings for college writers*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Resolution from “Students’ right to their own language” and the National Language Policy Policy Statement of the CCCC (2003). In G. Smitherman and V. Villanueva (Eds.) *Language diversity in the classroom*. College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English. XV
- Schlessman, E. (2011). Patterns and punctuation: Learning to question language. *Rethinking Schools*. 26(1), 33-37.
- Smitherman, G. (2006). *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans*. New York: Routledge.
- Weaver, C. (1979). *Grammar for teachers: Perspectives and definitions*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Wolfram, W., Adger, C., & Christian, D. (1999). *Dialects in schools and communities*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lucia Elden teaches composition and humanities at Mid Michigan Community College. She is also an English Language Arts High School Liaison, in which she connects with her local high school teachers. She is a doctoral student in Michigan State University’s Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education program, studying college readiness and academic identity.

Marilyn Wilson is a Professor at Michigan State University in the departments of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures and English, where she teaches English Education courses and researches areas of language and power in discourse communities.