2012

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

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1900

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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 in 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 Inés 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:

• 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-switching—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).

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

Much of this discussion has been on oral language. The ques-
tion under consideration here is whether students see possi-
bilities 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 flex-
bility with which speakers participate in conversation is not
often encouraged in written communica-
tion. 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 immedi-
ate 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.

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Writing as Possibility Rather Than as Prohibition

At issue is how teachers can take advantage of students' natu-
ral 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 sup-
plants 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 suc-
cessful 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 pos-
sess, 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 se-
quence 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 vari-
tions in their writing. In the end, we offer an example of an
inquiry-based approach for helping students learn about writ-
ing 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 us-
ing 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 dia-
logue 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 oc-
cur 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 re-
views and magazine or online reviews. The first review they
write is an informal review, which includes rhetorical choices
that would suit this audience—visu-
als, questions, frag-
ments, slang, catchy
word choice or anec-
dotes—for the pur-
pose of getting their classmate interested in reading the ar-
ticle (or at least the review). Students
post their reviews on the online course shell, so the "atten-
tion-getting" features are put to the test. Students then reply to
each other, critiquing their reviews.

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take advantage of students'
natural linguistic abilities to
make them more self-aware
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they already possess.

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 es-
say 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 Kim-
berlee'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 Ameri-
can student, uses AAE language patterns in the dialogue, along
with code-switching to more standard forms. As an example
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 the most troubles with teachers because they either are 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 what he be talking about. 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?

Freire: And that is why I say it is hard for students to learn. 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. 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.

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.
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 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 Spinelli’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 (Gelman & Minnici, 2008). Instead of having the rules thrust upon them, they discover and deeply learn language patterns and practices.

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 fuction.

Reimaging 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,”
A publication of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English

(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


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