

TOWARDS A CONSCIOUSNESS OF LANGUAGE: A LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY FOR MULTI- CULTURAL CLASSROOMS

ABSTRACT: Despite their complex language histories, writers from diverse cultural backgrounds often tend to believe that language's primary function is to convey information. This essay describes a language pedagogy which can help basic writers to understand language's potential to shape, not just to convey information about, social experience. Students from diverse backgrounds can then more effectively critique the relationships of language's uses in a variety of social contexts.

With the publication in 1974 of *Students' Right to Their Own Language*, composition scholars have acknowledged, even celebrated, their students' multiple languages, dialects, and complex language histories. But acknowledging students' rights to their own language does not mean that teachers still don't expect them to accommodate to the dominant uses of written language within the university. Susan Miller argues that the primary function of required writing courses since the earliest years of the modern university has been to teach students from less privileged social classes to accommodate to the norms of university speech and writing. The continuing use of basic writing courses as minority students' pathways into a more uniform language use has been debated afresh in the 1990s, and as one result, the profession is more aware of the issues involved for students when we unreflectively teach them to assimilate to dominant discourses. We are now far more conscious that learning standard English includes repositioning oneself in relation to community and heritage: adopting different styles also involves negotiating different senses of self. In particular, scholars' literacy narratives dramatize how accommodating to new ways with words can require substantial psychological and social dislocation for writers (Brodkey; Gilyard; Lu; Shen; Sommers).

For the last four years, I have been considering these issues in the

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context of co-directing, with Barbara Gleason, a pilot project at the City College of New York (CCNY). The Enrichment Approach to Language and Literacy, sponsored in part by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, mainstreamed basic writers with freshmen students into a two-semester, college-level writing course. Between 1993-96, over 900 students enrolled in these year-long courses, which also featured classroom tutors, faculty development, and program evaluation. Barbara Gleason and I have described this pilot project and its evaluation elsewhere (Soliday & Gleason). Here, I want to describe the curriculum and a language research project I developed during the two years I taught these courses. I will emphasize that one way to approach students' cultural differences is to focus on students' language use in social contexts. But I want to suggest that, before most students can critique the relationship between their own and dominant languages, they have to move towards a consciousness of language's potential to shape, not just to convey information about, social experience.

The Enrichment Approach "curriculum" might better be called "curriculums," since it evolved throughout three years, and since the twenty-eight professors who taught in the project imagined their courses differently. Still, at the project's conclusion we identified three common emphases. One was that teachers emphasized the descriptive study of language in one or more assignments, usually in the first semester. The second was that approaches to research began in the fall semester with ethnographic study in settings familiar to students and concluded with more traditional library research in the spring. The third emphasis was a developmental consideration of students' growth as writers over nine months. Along with portfolio evaluation, this developmental emphasis meant that most teachers also sequenced assignments across several weeks. For example, teachers usually conceived their research projects as a series of shorter assignments that sequenced different skills across time and that culminated in essays ranging from ten to twenty pages.

The student population at CCNY is among the most multicultural in the country, so that our urban classrooms reflect a high degree of difference in terms of spoken language: English as a Second (or third or fourth) Language, "border" languages, and nonstandard dialects of English. Within one classroom, up to sixteen different languages could be represented. Thus, one of the places we started with this curriculum was to gather more specific information about students' language histories. We surveyed students to ascertain what languages they and their families speak and which languages they can read and write as well as speak. We also asked teachers to assign literacy narratives in the first semester, and this became, by the teachers' vote, a mandatory feature of the curriculum. The literacy narrative assignment paral-

leled other language research assignments that teachers developed in which students described language in the multiple settings of work, church, home, school, street, or neighborhood. Some teachers assigned literacy narratives by writers from Gloria Anzaldúa to Malcolm X and asked students to reflect upon issues of language, culture, and identity. Others asked their students to analyze the differences between their spoken and written language. One class wrote poems in their first languages and/or English dialects, translated them into standard English, and then wrote about the translation process. Another professor's students constructed "language code books," guides for speakers new to the student's language. These assignments allowed students to narrate their language biographies and sometimes ambivalent relationships to the academy; they also gave teachers a fuller view of their students' linguistic backgrounds.

By emphasizing the descriptive study of language as a framework which enriches rather than replaces more traditional, prescriptive views of language, we hoped that our curriculum could draw upon the language expertise that students already possess as speakers in their own communities. As Eleanor Kutz, Suzy Groden, and Vivian Zamel write,

Seeing only what the entering students don't know, colleges have created a variety of "Learning Centers," "Resource Centers," "Writing Centers," "Developmental Studies Programs," and "Reading and Study Skills Courses" as isolated enterprises that disconnect the study of these linguistic practices both from the community that uses them and from the knowledge and competence students bring from other communities. Such efforts reflect a lack of understanding about how an individual is drawn into a community and into its conversations, as an active participant. (6)

Kutz and her colleagues establish a sociolinguistic framework which focuses upon the nature of language acquisition and the ways in which speakers acquire new competencies. These scholars begin by acknowledging students' competence as language users in everyday life and then develop inquiry-based assignments which help to keep the students' languages and those privileged by the academy in rich, active dialogue. Thus, their curriculum rejects the writing course as a simple means of accommodating different languages to dominant discourses.

One potential of the dialogue that Kutz and her associates describe is a critique of the relationship between dominant and subordinate languages in our society. If, as Richard Courage argues, we "bring literacy research into the classroom," we may then "develop a critique of the rigid demarcation of public and private spheres of life and lan-

guage and a narrow definition of public life" (494). But this critique does not flow naturally out of assignments focusing upon students' language histories. Over the years in our faculty workshops, several teachers commented that, while students narrated their language and/or literacy histories in detail, they had difficulty situating their own stories within a broader cultural context. The assignment itself did not necessarily provoke critique of the relationship between students' private and public languages.

After reflecting on this problem, I decided to embed the literacy narrative within a broader language project focusing on heightening students' awareness of language's social and cultural uses. I began with the sociolinguistic commonplace that speech is no more natural than writing because, like written texts, speech is embedded in a rich social context. "[L]earning to use written language," write Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels, "shares a common language base with learning to use oral language; consequently, the teaching of literacy must be founded, among other things, on a substantial understanding of the nature of human language" (42). For the fall semester, I decided to base the curriculum on increasing students' understanding of the nature of human language.

One principle of human language use as it has been studied by anthropologists is that the ability to analyze, so privileged in expository writing classes, is not exclusively connected to or caused by the written uses of language: the interpretive use of language cuts across cultures and across the orality/literacy divide (Finnegan). From this perspective, literacy does not cause analytical thinking. Instead, it may be a speaker's awareness of language's multiple possibilities that promotes that person's ability to speak critically about an event from a distance. Such possibilities would include the use of language to convey information, but also its ironic and metaphorical dimensions. This ironic possibility, the awareness that language can say more than is literally said, may be a precondition for achieving literacy rather than a direct consequence of learning to read and write. Robert Pattison speculates that it is this awareness of the disjunctions between reality and language that underlie the development of literacy. "Reading and writing may be parts of literacy but do not constitute the whole," Pattison argues: "Consciousness of the uses and problems of language is the foundation of literacy" (7, 6). Pattison's definition of literacy does not exclude mastery of the conventional features of learning to write college prose, since to be fully literate in any society means exhibiting control over a set of conventions. But Pattison argues that what precedes this control is a "literate attitude" towards language use, either spoken or written. A heightened awareness of "the perception of the original discontinuity between language and events and the attempt to resolve it are early stages of literacy" (10).

My goal in the first semester of this year-long course was to foster students' literate awareness of the uses and problems of language within their everyday social experience. Our common ground is language's use and value within our daily lives. I assumed that students could study their own language use from an academic perspective, bringing what they already knew into dialogue with different ways of knowing. But rather than begin by focusing on the possible friction between their language and mine, I wanted to emphasize how even the most mundane language can mean more than it appears to say. Thus, I suggested to the students that the language of everyday life is saturated with subtextual meanings: what we actually say in casual talk is never the whole story. In fact, the interesting story may be what speakers mean when they talk and not what they actually say.

I developed a Language Research Project, divided into seven separate assignments. I sequenced these across the second half of the first semester of the course, though assignments four and five were ongoing:

(1) A language narrative in which the student described his or her history as a language user and membership within a language group.

(2) A description of a language group. This paper focused upon what people looked like, how they dressed and behaved, where they gathered, what their environment felt and looked like, and so forth.

(3) A set of language samples used by the members of the language group (these could include written texts, such as song lyrics). Students had to keep a field notebook with dated entries and bring this to class.

(4) Summaries of the chapters in Peter Trudgill's *Sociolinguistics*.

(5) An assessment of each assignment, usually completed in class.

(6) An analysis draft which focused on interpreting the language samples. This draft was followed by conferences with teacher and tutor.

(7) A final research paper which incorporated the most significant parts of these assignments and that reflected revision over a period of time. Manuscript preparation was stressed in this typed, final draft.

In addition to reading the Trudgill book, we watched *Yeah, You*

Right, a documentary about New Orleans dialects, and listened to presentations by graduate students who had completed thesis projects on the subjects of gay men's language in New York City and Brooklynese in Sheepshead Bay. I created handouts about language use for the students such as a summary of the features of Black English Vernacular as Geneva Smitherman describes them. We also discussed two ethnographic projects focusing on language use in a restaurant and a laundromat, written by students from another teacher's class.

The first essay in the Language Research Project, a literacy narrative begun in class, acted as a heuristic for reflecting informally upon language attitudes and histories and for identifying a language group for further research. The next assignment, a descriptive draft about their chosen language group, required students to practice observing details and notetaking and then using vivid/specific language when turning notes into a draft. I asked students to focus on behavior, dress, and physical settings, emphasizing the traditional goal of showing rather than telling about a group of people for an outside audience. In the third assignment, a set of language samples, students had to develop ways to gather and begin to organize their samples, which they would eventually analyze. When they gathered these samples, students practiced basic research skills, including developing ways to study their language groups--surveying, interviewing, and observing individuals over a period of time and recording what happened in a notebook.

Throughout this portion of the project, we also discussed some of the concepts in Trudgill's book and students completed summaries of individual chapters. In addition, I gave students weekly self-assessments which asked them to answer questions such as "what will a reader learn from your paper about language use," or "what have you discovered about language and/or behavior so far that is new or interesting to you." These early assessments revealed that the challenges were those typical to doing research: some students had trouble settling on a particular group; others resisted the painstaking process of notetaking and tried to commit conversations to memory; and several had difficulty understanding how the individual assignments would culminate in a single product. These assessments also revealed that students were surprised to discover their own language habits, especially their own and their peers' use of slang.

As students completed the third assignment, I xeroxed individual language samples for the class. We discussed a dialogue which took place on a basketball court and two interviews about attitudes towards dialects conducted in Chinese and Caribbean neighborhoods. Here I emphasized that students could "read" their samples in the same way they would read literary texts because an interview with a Chinese-American businessman reflecting on the uses of correct En-

glish is not necessarily any more self-sufficient than the figurative language of a poem: all represent stretches of language that can be interpreted. In preparation for the next assignment, the analysis draft, I emphasized that language is not just a literal instrument: we could not communicate effectively if we didn't mean more than we say. Within the academy, interpreting the language of written texts explicitly is a prized activity. Throughout these discussions, I also used the samples to show students the conventions of introducing and incorporating quotations into the syntax of their prose, commenting on samples, and connecting a general statement to a specific sample.

The sixth assignment asked students to develop a thesis that interpreted their language samples through connected, fully developed paragraphs. As students' drafts began to emerge, I duplicated these for discussion of how writers were interpreting, and could further expand their interpretation of, their samples. In the seventh and final assignment, students transformed the analysis draft into the final research paper, often by incorporating the descriptive draft into their introduction and then developing their analysis drafts further for the body of the finished research paper. With this assignment, I emphasized manuscript preparation, blocking long quotations, and proof-reading.

At the end of this project, most students completed all the assignments and wrote ten to fifteen-page research papers, excluding the pages they had already generated earlier. By turning common language into formal texts, every student practiced the close reading of language that they will be expected to perform in required literature courses at CCNY. Some students were also able to interpret their findings through the concepts Trudgill establishes in his book. And, despite the differences in achievement, all the students had the opportunity to examine issues of language and cultural difference and to reflect upon their own language use while simultaneously acquiring the conventions of college essay writing.

This project highlighted a range of attitude and self-awareness towards language that my students possess. Some of the students revealed negative and contradictory attitudes towards their own language use. During class discussions, this group condemned nonschool talk; several claimed that they didn't use slang or speak Spanglish, and many doubted that subcultural uses of language could have social or political purposes. Language, they thought, conveys information, and they resisted Trudgill's or my desire to attribute meaning and purpose to a functional instrument. Other students, however, embraced the idea that nonschool uses of language are complex and rule-governed, and these students were particularly interested to learn that a subcultural use of language such as slang could express countercultural resistance and potentially act as a critique of main-

stream languages.

Below, I've summarized the students' findings from one class, which provide a glimpse into their nonschool linguistic experiences:

(1) Different language groups develop code languages in order to survive within mainstream cultures. In this way, bilingual speakers are able to preserve their cultural heritage. Immigrant families in New York City develop "border" languages in their new country to succeed in business, for example. Border languages include Spanglish, mixtures of French Creole and English, Cantonese and English, and "Bangrage," or Bengali and English. A student who conducted research in a bodega found that the owner, from Bangladesh, sprinkled his daily talk with phrases from Cantonese, English, and Spanish in order to enhance his business. The student concluded that a good deal of language learning and creative use of language occurs outside schools. One student studied the profanity used by women in a homeless shelter, and concluded that their harsh speech was "the language of a mask," or a defense against difficult circumstances. Another studied "the language of necessity" in a restaurant, concluding that servers developed a code that helped them to cope with stressful, unrewarding jobs.

(2) Several students investigated Peter Trudgill's summary of research which finds that women tend to speak more correctly than men. Most concluded that teenage girls speak more circumspectly than boys, although others argued that this depended upon the particular group being studied and the audience that the girls had when speaking.

(3) Street slang is pervasive, and many of the students were surprised to learn how unconsciously they and their peers use it in their everyday lives. Several analyzed their transcripts to see how street language fosters a particular kind of urban identity inflected by popular culture; others found that slang unifies different ethnic groups in the same way that "border" languages do.

(4) Language use by individuals and families isn't monolithic and depends heavily upon situation. One student followed his girlfriend for a day and found that she switched languages three times. At home, she spoke Haitian Creole with her father; with her boyfriend, she spoke English; with her girlfriends, she switched into an amalgam of Creole and English peppered with an aggressive street slang he had never heard her use. What especially surprised him was that neither she nor he had ever noticed this code switching.

(5) Family, peers, and community members profess strong opinions about language use; sometimes attitudes are conflicted and inconsistent, as in the case of Spanish speakers who condemn Spanglish and believe they don't use it but actually do in casual conversation. Although attitudes and use are complicated, speakers do not recognize this complexity.

The students who found the assignment particularly satisfying were those who affirmed the value of language use in familiar nonschool settings and explored the premise that language does more than convey information. Thus, for instance, the author of "The Language of a Mask" experienced a sea change in her thinking about the "rough talk" of the single mothers she lived with in a homeless shelter. At first, this student expressed dismay over the women's profanity and their aggressive postures, and she ascribed their speech to a lack of ambition and education. But as this student analyzed the women's conversations, she began to develop the thesis that their hostile speech masked the loneliness and struggle of their everyday lives. The women had developed a way of speaking that helped them to negotiate within their social worlds and that meant more than it appeared to say on the surface.

Here are two excerpts from final drafts about Spanglish and street slang, which, along with rap music and gender differences, are usually the most popular topics in my classes. In the first excerpt, the student returned to her high school in East Harlem, where she studied students' language use and bilingual teachers' attitudes towards Spanglish, the language which reflects, she asserts, "a dual cultural identity." In the early part of her paper, she identifies two uses of Spanglish, using several samples to illustrate two patterns—one where speakers mix the languages, and another where speakers speak for longer stretches in either language. The student writes,

Almost all the Hispanic students [in the high school I studied] speak their native language as well as English. Most of the time, when they are communicating they use both languages combined or mixed, and make use of what we call Spanglish:

1st speaker: "Hello," [student's name] Como estas? [Hello! How are you?]

2nd speaker: "Fine," y tu? [Fine, and you?]

1st speaker: Ahi, Como se dio el "party" anoche? Me dijeron que se dio "nice." [So-so, how was the party last night? People told me it was nice]

2nd speaker: Ese "party" se dio "heavy." [That party was heavy, meaning great]

In this example, notice how [the first speaker] mixed the languages; instead of using "hola" she used "hello." And then [the second speaker] said "fine" meaning "bien." [The first speaker continued using English words: "party" and "nice" instead of "fiesta" and "bueno," and [the second speaker]: "heavy" instead of "pesado." This is the epitome of Spanglish and the most common use of Spanglish among bilingual speakers.

In the second excerpt, a student investigated the different ways in which men and women in a mixed African-American and Latino neighborhood in the South Bronx use slang according to situations defined by the speaker's status, gender, and behavioral codes, especially the non-verbal. After describing how a young man uses language to communicate respectfully to an elderly woman, the student turns to consider what happens when males feel they are "dissed":

Another side to this situation [described in the previous paragraph] is when Hispanics feel that they are being disrespected. Sometimes this happens when another Hispanic looks "dead" at them. Dead meaning looking straight into someone's eyes in a mean way. This totally changes their tone and vocabulary:

Hispanic male: What the fuck you looking at?

2nd male: An ugly-ass nigger.

Hispanic male: Fuck you, bitch.

2nd male: What you said?

Hispanic male: You heard me, bitch.

In this sample, the importance of respect for Hispanics is displayed. Hispanic teenagers are very much into the receiving of respect. Their attitude of respect is that to give respect, respect must first be received. When disrespect and not respect is given, disrespect is returned in the form of anger. The result of their anger is the language of taboo.

These novice writers have accommodated to the demands of conventional academic essay writing. Each attempts to use writerly cues to involve their unknown readers in the process of reading ("In this sample, notice how"; "Another side to this situation"). Both structure their paragraphs conventionally to present the context for each sample and their interpretation of a pattern they discovered from a welter of data. Both practice the close reading of text in order to arrive at a generalization ("This is the epitome of Spanglish"; "The result . . . is the language of taboo"), and both are aware of the coherence between their paragraphs.

Equally important, these students practiced academic writing and thinking in the context of reflecting upon and scrutinizing language use in their everyday lives. The first writer categorized different kinds of Spanglish and related them to the complex cultural identity of Latino immigrants in New York City. The second writer attempted to show how speakers in the South Bronx shifted codes according to situation, which included gender, age, and nonverbal cues. In this way, both students move between their ways with words and those of the composition classroom. And both writers affirm the value of subordinate languages by acknowledging that each plays a social purpose within a subcultural group: neither writer views Spanglish or English slang as the random linguistic activity of uneducated speakers.

The Language Research Project increased these students' awareness that language is not just a functional instrument. A functional attitude towards language is also common among students from white, middle-class homes. But for my students, reflecting upon the nature of language involves a more complex reflection upon self and relationships to different groups or communities. It is vital that this sort of reflection occur, partly because, to succeed within the academy, students have to contend with the fact that language is not literal or self-sufficient.

For many of my basic writing students, the struggle to interpret a passage from *Pride and Prejudice* (a required text in one of their literature courses) involves a struggle with an aspect of language use that is ordinary but appears to them to be extraordinary. Through discussions with students about their projects, I grew to see that they resent professors who expect them to dig for "hidden" meaning in texts. From this perspective, Austen's novel appears to say what it says, and to expect otherwise goes against the grain of how language seems to work in everyday life. It is language itself, rather than just the academic text, that is self-sufficiently meaningful for many basic writing students.

My overarching goal for language research projects, then, is to lay the groundwork for an alternative rhetoric for reading and writing that challenges students to consider how speech in everyday life—as Austen's dialogues so often foreground—never just says what it ap-

pears to say: a deep structure of social gesture, implicit cues, context, and possible interpretation governs even the most mundane conversations. My students believe that nonliteral or "hidden" meaning resides solely in canonical texts and in aesthetic language. I believe that a writing class can help them to see that language's suggestiveness is a feature of human communication that they have already achieved some competence with and that is foregrounded, not exclusively possessed, by literary language.

This emphasis upon the sociolinguistic nature of language is also significant for my students because it provides them with a foundation for reflecting upon their own language in relationship to the language of mainstream institutions. Given the increasing diversity of our classrooms, helping students to think about language as language can also help them to articulate possible language conflicts. As Patrick Bruch and Richard Marback point out, the 1974 *Students' Right to Their Own Language* rests in part on a concept of linguistic competence that is both liberating and limiting. It is limiting, they argue, if, in affirming our students' communicative competence, we merely re-establish a traditional framework of liberal pluralism where students are invited to master more than one language and then choose to use the one suitable to a particular social occasion. We need to examine a traditional linguistic concept of competence more critically so that students can understand that not all competencies are valued equally. This would mean, for example, that the language of taboo my student describes, using a discussion from Trudgill's book, could be further analyzed in relationship to its linguistic other, polite institutional talk. From a critical perspective, profanity is not just a competence that some speakers have achieved: it is also a potential critique of or resistance towards mainstream uses of English.

Although this critical impulse is implicit in the Language Research Project, in revising this project for future courses, I intend to add a final assignment which explicitly asks students to reflect more completely on the relationships between the language use they studied and language use in mainstream domains such as school. I am also working to integrate matters of style into this curriculum in order to help new students develop a richer sense of personal voice within the daunting framework of writing a long research paper. I have found that CCNY students in advanced writing classes can situate themselves in complicated ways in relation to mainstream values and languages, possibly because, over time and through multiple writing situations, they have become far more aware of the uses and problems posed by the English language. As important, because these advanced writers are in the process of developing idiosyncratic voices that they can employ within the context of academic writing, they are also more intellectually able to examine the relationship between style and cultural

value.

The different ways in which advanced and novice writers locate themselves in relation to mainstream uses of language are, in part, developmental. This developmental emphasis helps us to see that the goal of critique is one that should unfold over time as new students gain a surer sense of themselves as college students and, as one consequence, a richer sense of language's possibilities as they read and write throughout different disciplines. In the first-year course, my primary goal is to ask my students to become researchers of their own language use and through this research to move beyond familiar, functional attitudes toward language. I hope that the result of their research is the growth of a literate attitude towards language. This literate attitude is one way for students to begin to consider their own relationship to dominant ways of speaking and writing. Ideally, at the beginning of students' sojourn through CCNY, I hope to bring different languages and their implicit values into a productive dialogue--a dialogue based upon students', and my own, increasing consciousness of language's power to shape as well as to reflect our experience.

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