

TEACHING LINGUISTICS

Linguistics matters: Resistance and relevance in teacher education

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This article emphasizes the importance and benefits of showing college students, especially those in teacher education programs, how the material in introductory linguistics courses is relevant to K–12 language arts education. It offers four specific examples of course activities and assignments that can help connect material about the structure of English, language change, and linguistic diversity to the teaching of ‘English’, language arts, and writing at all levels. Framing these examples is a discussion of potential student and public resistance that instructors should bear in mind when designing course syllabi and activities.*

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1. INTRODUCTION. On the first day of class, I ask the hundred or so students in my introduction to English linguistics course how many of them are there because they have to be. Typically, about half of the students raise their hands. And I know that many of these students are wondering, on this first day, why in the world they are required to take this course to be an English/language arts teacher at the primary or secondary level. Nobody mentioned linguistics in their K–12 language arts classes. So how is this class going to help them become the teachers they aspire to be?

Linguists should not be surprised that students bring this question to the first day of class. Linguists and linguistics all too often get marginalized in discussions of language standards and instruction in education.¹ For me, the key is that students are no longer questioning the relevance of linguistics to K–12 education by the last day of class. In this article, I argue that every linguist teaching introductory courses has the power to counter the marginalized positioning of linguistics in education by showing students why linguistics matters for teaching ‘English’, be that language arts at the K–12 level or writing and literature at the college level.² If we, as linguists, want people to understand

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¹ The recent kerfuffle caused by Joan Acocella’s (2012) book review ‘The English wars’ in *The New Yorker*, and Ryan Bloom’s (2012) follow-up blog post ‘Inescapably, you’re judged by your language’, demonstrated yet again the widespread misperception that linguists are liberal relativists arguing that everyone should get to talk and write however they want, out of touch with the reality that language standards matter. In this case, Steven Pinker, Ben Zimmer, and other linguists with access to mainstream media responded quickly, trying to set the record straight that linguists are very interested in how Standard English, as one of many varieties of English, works and how it wields the social power it does; no linguist is trying to deny the social and educational importance of the standard.

² This article focuses primarily on K–12 teacher training in the United States, and I often rely on the phrase ‘K–12 language arts’ as a cover term for teaching at the primary and secondary levels that covers English language, literature, and writing. That said, I believe that the principles and activities described here can be adapted for the college-level writing classroom and, therefore, are useful for graduate student instructors. Students training specifically to teach English as a Second or Foreign Language typically are required to take more coursework in applied linguistics than those training for K–12 language arts generally, but the introductory course described here would be valuable for them as well. Of course, linguists teaching nonintroductory linguistics courses could also effectively help students make the kinds of connections discussed here between linguistics and education.

how systematic knowledge of how language works can productively inform curricula at the K–12 level and above, which we should, we cannot hand off to instructors in education or elsewhere the responsibility of making the argument for us.

At the University of Michigan, as is true at many universities, undergraduates seeking to earn teaching certification in English are required to take a survey course in English linguistics. I think this requirement is an excellent thing: aspiring K–12 language arts teachers should have at the very least a basic understanding of the structure of English as well as of language variation and change. But with this kind of course requirement comes a responsibility for those of us who teach the course: we must help students understand the relevance of linguistics to teaching English at any level. We cannot assume that students will intuitively see how information ranging from English morphology to American dialects could be applied in the K–12 language arts classroom (or the college writing classroom); it is our job to create activities and discussions that help students see the connections and applications.

The University of Michigan's course requirement responds to state standards for teacher preparation, and the state standards reflect the fact that leading national teaching organizations have endorsed the importance of linguistic knowledge for teacher preparation. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that English language arts teachers have knowledge about the history of English as well as the ability to use an understanding of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics to help students with mastery of oral and written forms of language. NCATE also establishes as a minimum acceptable standard that these teachers 'know and respect diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions and social roles and show attention to accommodating such diversity in their teaching' (NCTE/NCATE standard 3.1.4). It is then the job of instructors of introductory English linguistics courses, to echo the language of the NCTE/NCATE standards, to help college students move from knowing about the structure of English and respecting linguistic diversity to being equipped with pedagogical strategies to help their future students master Standard American English and various academic genres while affirming students' home dialects and languages.

In this article, I provide four practical examples of ways to connect material from an introductory linguistics course to K–12 teaching and writing instruction.³ I frame these examples with a discussion of three kinds of resistance that we as instructors must bear in mind in designing course syllabi and activities. The first is potential student resistance: students bring to class strong prior beliefs about what constitutes 'good grammar teaching', and they may understandably resist the ways that linguistics courses challenge some of those beliefs. The second is potential public resistance: students who incorporate more descriptive approaches to language into their thinking about language arts pedagogy may well meet resistance in their practice teaching and elsewhere. And the third is potential instructor resistance: with so many fundamental linguistic topics to cover in a term, does application to education really merit significant class time?

I address potential student resistance first and propose two antidotes: open discussion of resistance, and syllabus design that emphasizes pedagogical, political, and social relevance. The four practical examples then illustrate options for syllabus design. I subse-

³ The textbook *How English works: A linguistic introduction* (3rd edn., 2012), which I cowrote with Michael Adams, works from the premise that such connections are central to teaching English linguistics, often in English departments. Here I expand on some of the exercises and discussion boxes included in the textbook.

quently turn to a discussion of ways to incorporate potential public resistance that address key learning goals, before concluding with a counter to potential instructor resistance to some of the learning goals anchoring this article.

2. POTENTIAL STUDENT RESISTANCE: EMPHASIZING RELEVANCE. Linguistics, if people know what it is at all, is often regarded as a highly specialized discipline with little relevance to people's day-to-day experience with language. I admit that I was not sure what linguistics involved when I arrived at college as an undergraduate, and I took an introductory course primarily because I knew I loved learning languages—so maybe I would like studying them too. Informal polls of undergraduate and graduate students in the English Department at the University of Michigan suggest that most students (before coursework in linguistics) are not sure exactly what linguistics involves, and they assume none of it is relevant to their studies, even those interested in composition and teaching language arts. As a result, students may not know to seek out linguistics to answer questions they have about language-related topics, or they may actively resist doing so.

For those teaching at universities where an undergraduate linguistics course is required, we should seize the opportunity to help students understand how fundamental linguistics is to teaching English language arts. For those teaching at universities where a linguistics course is not required, we should advertise our courses so as to show their relevance to students with a range of interests and career goals. Too often the course description emphasizes the abstract study of language over, or to the exclusion of, the application of this knowledge to real-world issues. It is not pandering to use a course description to help students see how linguistics intersects with provocative social, political, and educational issues, as well as many other academic disciplines (see the samples given in Appendix A).

Once students are in an introductory course, we as instructors should anticipate resistance to some of the material, perhaps especially when it runs counter to some of students' lived experiences with other language authorities. As I have written about elsewhere (Curzan 2002), the material we teach about the linguistic equality of all dialects, the inevitability of language change, and the social construction of language authority can challenge fundamental understandings of language that students bring with them to class—and their first reaction, understandably, may be to resist this new information in favor of the linguistic security that comes with the notions of right and wrong that they have learned in schools for years and years, from much-respected instructors. This situation presents a valuable learning opportunity if we can help students reflect on and evaluate the language authority they have encountered in the past and are encountering in this course.

To accomplish this goal, we must feel comfortable making potential student resistance a focus of discussion. As instructors, we can ask directly: for example, What notions seem counterintuitive to students or at least hard to accept? We ourselves can put on the table the question: Does accepting the linguistic equality of all dialects mean that we must abandon the teaching of Standard English? At least some students are asking themselves this question. This second question is especially important to discuss given the widespread misconception that linguists generally advocate the overthrow of all 'language standards'. We should be talking with students in introductory courses about the possibility of teaching Standard English in the schools while allowing students to question its tenets and without denigrating the other varieties of English students bring to school (Curzan 2009). It takes a lot of cognitive, if not also emotional, work for stu-

dents to dislodge tenets of standard language ideology to the point where Standard English can be seen as a critical part of an educated person's linguistic repertoire but not the only 'correct' language option in all circumstances.

We as instructors cannot leave it to chance or intuition that simply presenting core material from the field of linguistics will lead to students seeing its relevance to K–12 educational goals or to their daily lives, as speakers and writers as well as future teachers. We must help them forge those connections, first by having these conversations and second by incorporating the links into classroom activities focused on specific language topics.

3. PEDAGOGICAL EXAMPLES: FORGING CONNECTIONS. Some units in an introductory English linguistics course more obviously lend themselves to a discussion of pedagogical implications, and I present two detailed examples here. First, a unit on American dialects can incorporate conversations about how teachers can address linguistic diversity in classrooms. The Oakland School Board Resolution of 1996–97 remains, to quote then Oakland schools superintendent Carolyn Gettridge, 'a teachable moment of national proportion' (quoted in Wolfram 1998:119)—although at this point most undergraduates will no longer have any memories of the coverage. There are excellent articles available that explain what happened with the Oakland resolution (e.g. Baron 2011, Rickford n.d., Smitherman 1998, Smitherman & Quartey-Annan 2011, Wolfram 1998);⁴ it is also instructive for students to read the original and revised resolution, as well as the LSA Resolution on Ebonics and newspaper articles from the time.

In my experience, however, incorporating these kinds of readings is not enough to help students think through the implications of Oakland for their own classrooms. In my course, students and I watch together the segment from *Do you speak American?* on the code-switching curriculum in the Los Angeles Unified School District, so that students can see what it could look like to incorporate a more descriptive approach to grammar and code-switching, even with younger students. In this short segment, elementary-school students are interacting with an instructor who respects their home languages and is focused on expanding their linguistic repertoires through a lesson on code-switching to Mainstream American English. This clip can be usefully compared with a segment from Fox News, aired in 2007, that features Garrard McClendon's efforts to stamp out characteristic features of African American English in high-school students' usage (<http://africanamericanenglish.com/2010/04/05/clip-from-fox-news/>). These two glimpses into classrooms provide a stark contrast in teaching approaches for helping students master Standard American English, informed by very different ideologies about 'correctness' in language and about the potential value of affirming students' home dialects.

I also ask students to try exercises on the grammar of nonstandard dialects from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) and Brown (2009), among others. At one level, I am modeling the kind of language-based activities these future teachers can do in their own classrooms; at another, I am aiming to help all students understand the intellectual work (and play, I hope) of trying to figure out a grammar one does not know, in a space where we can talk openly about the challenges. For students who speak some of these nonstandard dialects, these exercises reinforce course material about the systematicity of their home dialects, as they articulate the grammatical rules they know intuitively.

⁴ Baron (2011) and Smitherman (1998, Smitherman & Quartey-Annan 2011) provide information about the Ann Arbor Black English case as well. James Baldwin's (1979) editorial, written in the wake of the Ann Arbor case, is powerful reading.

For students whose home dialects are close to Standard American English, these examples can bring home what speakers of nonstandard dialects are asked to do every day in school contexts in order to master Standard English. For this latter group of students another key challenge is to help them understand what it would be like to be told from an early age that you—and your family and your friends—talk ‘broken’ or somehow inferior English. This past year students and I watched a video clip from the 2004 New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAY) panel commemorating the twenty-five-year anniversary of the Ann Arbor Black English case. In the clip Robin Thomas, who was a student at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in the late 1970s and in 2004 was a teacher in the Ypsilanti, Michigan, school district, talks eloquently about realizing that the way to stop getting so many red marks all over her papers—many of which responded to nonstandard language features—was to write less, and so, as she puts it, she checked out of school. This story seemed to resonate for students; it helped them see the stakes of traditional correction models in terms of student motivation and identity.

Occasionally, colleagues have asked if I feel concerned that these discussions move into contested social and political territory, and I do not. In fact, I think that having intellectual conversations about controversial topics is at the heart of a liberal arts education and is exactly how instructors show students why linguistics matters to their everyday experiences in the world.

Another obvious connection of linguistic material to pedagogy, and to controversial issues, involves linking a unit on language acquisition to conversations about bilingual education; it is also possible to apply material from the history of English in the US to current English-only policies, which also can have implications for bilingual education funding. In my experience, students often read about the process of child language acquisition and then ask me why the US public education system typically teaches foreign languages so late, near or at the end of what appears to be a critical period for language acquisition. I cannot provide a definitive answer to this important question, but I can incorporate readings that cover state funding policies for bilingual education and debates about, for example, the acceptability of nonstandard accents of bilingual Spanish-English teachers in Arizona (e.g. Lacey 2011). In class, we can then talk about the ideologies informing these debates and the opportunities that get lost for students to develop biliteracy in English and in a home language—an experience that resonates personally for a number of students. Are these conversations sometimes complicated and inconclusive? Yes, absolutely. But they plant the seeds for students to continue thinking critically about these issues, which will continue to fuel debates in and beyond school settings.

Let me now turn to two less obvious examples to show how a range of topics can be used to help future educators incorporate linguistics into their thinking about teaching. First, one can connect a unit on Internet English to issues of written register acquisition. I have done an exercise with students (in classes ranging from twenty-five to one hundred students) where I ask each student to bring in a list of ten etiquette rules for texting or online chatting (see Appendix B). As a class, we then compile a shared list of etiquette rules, which typically range from rules for punctuation and emoticon use to appropriate forms of back-channeling, from the changing meaning of acronyms like *lol* to off-limits topics. It quickly becomes apparent to everyone in the room how nonchaotic this written register is, despite public laments along those lines. Students are typically struck by how much knowledge they share about ‘good texting/online chatting’. I then shift the conversation to how the acquisition of this register’s conventions is not all that different from the acquisition of academic registers; it is just that online registers seem

'more fun', and the acquisition process has usually not involved school-based prescription. With this parallel, we talk about how register acquisition allows participation in specific communities, the stakes of getting the conventions wrong, mechanisms for acquiring the conventions, and so forth. As in discussions of American dialects, we talk about how school can and should be about expanding students' repertoires, both spoken and written, rather than replacing literacy skills students already bring with them—and how actually to exploit those skills in the acquisition process.

As a second example, a review of the morphological processes that create new words (as well as the types of semantic changes that create new word meanings) can be greatly enlivened by using new slang as examples; students can then pursue a variety of follow-up activities that have them critically investigating key pedagogical resources. For example, I have asked students to create dictionary entries for new slang terms/meanings, using a selected college dictionary as a model for the form of entries (see Appendix C). In the process, students typically must consider the politics of usage labels such as *slang*, *colloquial*, *vulgar*, and so on, as well as the procedures for creating concise definitions, ordering meanings, and selecting pronunciations for inclusion. Some of my former students have adapted this exercise for the K–12 classroom.⁵

If we as instructors focus part of the class on pedagogical applications of this material, students in the course will also come up with classroom activities that we had not considered. For example, a student who was student teaching while he was taking my course created an assignment for his junior high students in which they could include three slang terms in a one-page essay, and for each slang term they had to provide a footnote with a clear, concise definition. He said these were the best essays he had received so far because the students were not only fully engaged by the novelty of the assignment but, as importantly, they were also thinking about their word choices carefully because they wanted to make each slang word count toward the effectiveness of the essay as a whole. As part of the unit, he and the students also talked about why these words would not typically appear in a school-based essay and how they could find other ways to enliven their prose for school.

This student was working in a school and with a teacher who was open to trying more descriptive approaches to language arts instruction. Not all students will have this experience, and it is to this issue that I turn in the next section.

4. POTENTIAL PUBLIC RESISTANCE: FACILITATING CONVERSATION. We as instructors do well to prepare teacher education students for the resistance they may encounter when they are practice teaching, if they want to implement more descriptive teaching methods, and in the process we can prepare all students for the resistance they may encounter when they talk about some of these ideas with friends and family. If we do not equip future educators for the obstacles they will potentially face in implementing new approaches to language, they are likely to revert to more traditional pedagogies (McBee-Orzulak 2011). Students have one term of our course, which is a drop in the sea of standard language ideology in which most students have been immersed in school, family, and other settings. Even for students deeply committed to implementing linguistically informed curricula by the end of an introductory course, significant resistance can undermine their confi-

⁵ Units on phonology can, if we structure them this way, help students to understand patterns of spelling mistakes in student writing, when students are representing phonological realizations (e.g. *lookt*), and to know why students who reduce final consonant clusters in a word like *desk* will then have the plural form *desses*.

dence in their own authority on these matters if they are not prepared for the experience, especially as their introductory linguistics course fades in the rear view mirror.

We as linguists know how difficult it can be for nonlinguists to hear what we are saying about language variation and change without writing us off as impractical liberals who want to abolish all standards. With each passing year of my teaching career, I have been talking more and more openly with students about these issues, especially later in the term. I describe to them encounters I have had at schools or with other educators in trying to explain that the goal of any curriculum that involves code-switching is to help all students master Standard English while also valuing other dialects. I share with them my article ‘Says who?’, published in *PMLA* in 2009, and the mostly negative letters that were published in response.⁶ I ask students which facts or ideas that we have discussed during the term have most effectively asked them to rethink the binary of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ when it comes to dialect variation and language change. We then talk about how all of us might use these facts or ideas in conversations outside our classroom. I learn a lot from these conversations, as do students—both from thinking through the question and from listening to each other’s responses.

Through these conversations, students seem to be better prepared for resistance when they encounter it; they can see the encounter as part of a bigger pattern and decide how they want to respond. Recently, a student who was practice teaching at the time came to my office to talk with me about how he might approach a supervising teacher who was orally correcting students whenever they read and asking him to do the same. We talked about ways he could acknowledge the supervising teacher’s goals and propose that he adopt a different strategy of working with the students on text comprehension, as opposed to standard enunciation.

Another student emailed me about an encounter she had a couple of weeks after she completed my introductory English linguistics course, and it serves as an important reminder to all of us about the teacher attitudes toward African American English that students still commonly experience at school. This is not a typical success narrative in that the student does not ‘win’ this argument, but it seems to me a very successful outcome of the course:

I just got back from a dinner out with my friend and her mom, who is a middle school teacher ... Over dinner, we got into the discussion of teachers helping students who control varieties of English different from standard in their home. My friend’s mom, who has been teaching school for 30 years claimed she ‘does not tolerate the ghetto slang of Ebonics in her class’ and ‘when children who speak that colloquial slang have to read in class, she doesn’t understand what they are saying, but just passes them along, hoping they will assimilate into the “proper” culture eventually.’ ... Never in my life have I felt more passion to launch into an angry argument, but considering this woman was buying me dinner, I restrained myself to politely offering some of the lessons I learned from you this semester—code switching, teaching children how to translate nonstandard varieties to standard, the [Oakland] school board resolution. When I informed her of the woman who stopped writing homework assignments because her teacher destroyed her papers with red ink, my friend’s Mom dismissed, ‘Yeah, I remember when they passed that thing trying to get us to teach Ebonics ... pshh yeah right.’ Needless to say, I instantaneously understood the challenge of having this conversation with someone who is completely closed minded and opinionated on the topic, especially someone in a position to truly make a difference in the linguistic skills of children—a teacher. Even though I thought I knew what you were talking about in class when you described the challenge you have as a linguist, I didn’t fully grasp the feeling until tonight. Without your class, I would have not been able to engage actively in this conversation ...

⁶ I have also shared Margalit Fox’s (1999) column ‘Dialects’, published in ‘On Language’ in *The New York Times* when William Safire was on vacation, and the entirely negative letters to the editor that were published in response.

What seems most important to me is that this student was not surprised or thrown off kilter by encountering resistance to linguistically informed curricula because we had openly talked about the resistance in class. She had strategies for trying to have a rational conversation about it and was not, in the end, discouraged by the conversation. In fact, her message ends with a sentence about her feeling fired up about continuing to advocate for linguistic equality.

Certainly not all students are convinced enough by the course material to significantly trouble tenets of standard language ideology by the end of an introductory course. But through open discussion of resistance, they are more aware of what is at stake in public conversations about language, of the links between language and identity, and of different approaches to language arts education.

5. POTENTIAL INSTRUCTOR RESISTANCE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS. One possible response from instructors of introductory linguistics courses at this moment in the article might sound like this: ‘This is all well and good, but all of those exercises take significant class time, which I just don’t have’. This is certainly true: they do take time. But I cannot imagine much more important work that students and I could be doing together in class. These are the challenging discussions that do not necessarily get sparked just from a reading but benefit from the catalyst of face-to-face conversation. These discussions clarify for students how to reconcile linguistic knowledge with educational goals focused on mastery of Standard English for all students as well as how this knowledge can inform public discussion of issues from language policy to the effects of the Internet. Of course, these discussions also involve the review and reinforcement of core linguistic material (e.g. phonology, morphosyntax, semantics, dialect variation), while simultaneously emphasizing relevance to everyday experiences with language outside the classroom—which makes for more lasting learning.

This approach to introductory linguistic material can also reinforce a fundamental skill and learning goal that cuts across disciplines in academia, referred to in the scholarship as reflective thinking. Scholarship on reflective thinking emphasizes the following pedagogical principles, among others (e.g. King 2000): respect students’ assumptions and give them opportunities to discuss these assumptions in relation to new material from the course; discuss controversial issues without clear-cut answers and in the process ask students to analyze and evaluate different perspectives in addition to supporting their own perspectives; and provide students opportunities to gather and analyze data, making judgments about its relevance to broader questions and arguments. By forging connections between linguistic knowledge and real-world issues, including those in education, we as instructors can ask students to do all this intellectual work, while also helping them become accredited teachers and critically reflective citizens who do not dismiss students or cultures based on the language variety they speak.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

English 305: Introduction to English Linguistics. This course provides an introduction to the structure of English, including five core areas: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse. In this course you will learn to transcribe the sounds of English, describe how English words are formed, and analyze the structure of sentences and longer segments of discourse. In the process, the course will introduce you to some of the tools and methods of modern linguistics. Social issues of prescriptivism and applications in pedagogical settings will be addressed at relevant moments in the course.

English 305: Exploring the English Language. The English language, like every language in the world, is a complex, rule-governed system that native speakers use every day without having to think consciously about the intricacies of what they know when they ‘know how to speak English’. In this course, we will un-

pack that knowledge, from how sounds are strung together to make words to how we take turns in conversation, from where new words come from to why Americans speak different dialects. English 305 both introduces the systematic study of language in general and gives you entirely new ways to think about the English language you see and hear all around you. The course covers the many levels of structure at work in language—from sounds to words to sentences to discourse—as well as the ways speakers learn and change language over time. Discussions also focus on the social and educational issues tied up in language, including attitudes toward dialects, the teaching of Standard English, language and gender, and bilingual education. We will address questions such as: Why isn't *ftagn* a possible English word? Is it *syllabi* or *syllabuses*? How are some words so 'bad' they are not allowed on network television? Is texting ruining the English language? No background in linguistics is required; the critical prerequisite for the course is genuine curiosity about the details of language.

APPENDIX B: ONLINE CHATting/TEXTING ETIQUETTE ASSIGNMENT

For this assignment, focus either on texting or on online chatting. Create a list of ten etiquette rules for how to write in this register. At least half of these rules should focus on the written conventions of this type of communication (e.g. use of punctuation and acronyms); others can focus on the social conventions related to content, response times, etc.

In class, we will compile a list of etiquette rules to see how many are shared across members of the course. This activity will help us think about critics' claim that online chatting and texting are creating chaos in the written language.

APPENDIX C: DICTIONARY ENTRY ASSIGNMENT

For this assignment, choose two slang words that are not currently in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th edition (2011). Using the format of the *AHD* entries, provide a full entry for each word. So the entry should include all of the following information:

- headword
- pronunciation(s)
- part of speech
- usage label(s) if appropriate
- numbered list of definitions
- etymology if possible
- derived forms.

If you think that the word merits a Usage Note, please add that as well. We will compile all of these entries into a slang glossary for the entire class.

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