Linguistics in general education:
Expanding linguistics course offerings through core competency alignment

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Currently, linguistics (LING) courses are underrepresented in general education at most US universities. As general education requirements undergo reform in higher education, the field of linguistics has an opportunity to assume a more central role. We argue that linguistics courses aligned with the key competencies of critical thinking, information literacy, and inquiry and analysis are well positioned to augment general education curricula, particularly at institutions that utilize common student learning objectives. An innovative The Language of Now core course and its signature assignment, a learner-centered research project on the use of the text-messaging discourse marker *lol*, illustrate how the methods used in linguistic inquiry are amenable to a range of standards that support general education goals.*

Keywords: general education, core curriculum, common SLOs, course alignment, undergraduate linguistics courses, LOL, sociolinguistics assignment, inquiry-based pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently published an article that highlights the American Historical Association's efforts to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the entire discipline's Ph.D. recipients (Cassuto 2018). *Where historians work* is an interactive online database that catalogs the career outcomes of the 8,515 historians who earned Ph.D.s at US universities from 2004 to 2013. While the Linguistic Society of America's (LSA) annual report on *The state of linguistics in higher education* (2017) includes data on career outcomes for linguists, gleaned from both the LSA membership directory and two National Science Foundation surveys, the capacity to track every graduate is not yet within reach. Yet even without this data, it is safe to say that given the high number of Linguistics Ph.D.s awarded from 2005–2015 ($n = 2,623$), not all degree holders pursuing a career in academia will find a home in a bona fide linguistics department. In order to stay employed in academia, many linguistic Ph.D. holders must table their specialization and accept the 'generalist' label in an English or foreign language department. In many cases, those who intend to etch out a career in higher education will agree to tackle any sort of course on grammar, the history of English, and—if we are so fortunate—introductory linguistics. Inherent in this reality is the perception in higher education that linguistics is a boutique career offering impractical courses for most of today's professions and workforce.

It was quite an anomaly that we, the co-authors of this article, found ourselves—the only two linguists on campus—housed in a school of education at a state university. We were hired to teach English grammar to future elementary-school teachers and second language acquisition to those who would soon be working in ESL and bilingual classrooms. Yet in the spirit of offering a linguistics course to majors outside our School of Education, we submitted an introductory linguistics course to be considered for the general education curriculum. Since it was approved in 2014, this course has experienced strong enrollment; we have taught LING 2050: The Language of Now to 400+ nonmajors on a yearly basis, a feat quite remarkable given that our university's enrollment currently hovers around 4,000. Despite our relative success in enrollment, it has not

necessarily been pure luck that allowed us to expand our reach in this way. Instead, higher education's approach to general education is moving toward a model that embraces common STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES (SLOs) across the curriculum so that regardless of what content is taught, the same competencies can be developed in students. This shift has opened a window of opportunity to advance our field—not only for us, but for linguists at other universities as well.

In this paper, we make a case for introducing more linguistics courses into general education curricula. When compared to other disciplines' presence in the course offerings for fulfilling general education requirements, linguistics is overwhelmingly underrepresented. Yet the practice of studying language from a linguistic perspective (that is, the way linguists tend to structure assignments, fieldwork, and research projects) happens to be well disposed to state and national standards for general education requirements. To illustrate this point, we present a project from The Language of Now—a freshman-level sociolinguistics course for nonmajors—that centers around the text-messaging discourse marker *lol* and draws on several touchstone competencies, including critical thinking, information literacy, and inquiry and analysis.

2. BACKGROUND.

2.1. COURSE DEVELOPMENT. In 2014, we were tasked with designing a linguistics course that would be offered as part of the general education requirements for our institution, which already happened to have a course in its catalog entitled LING 2050: The Language of Now. To our knowledge, this course had not ever been offered either on our campus or at our flagship university. The accompanying course description was as follows:

> Explores the relationship between pop culture, technology, and language change. Examines the linguistic significance of new technologies such as texting, gaming, IM, and social networking.

Intrigued, we began working to develop this course. Since no sociolinguistics course of any type is offered on our campus and since the course had no prerequisites, we knew we needed to cover some basic linguistic ground before delving too deeply into the technology aspect mentioned in the catalog description. Thus, LING 2050 shares some similarities with a typical Language in the USA-type course, with emphasis on American English varieties and the corresponding sociolinguistic principles and ideas that arise when discussing such topics. But to stay true to the course title—The Language of Now—we also incorporated course modules that address topics such as the role of computer-mediated communication in language change, the cultural significance of emoji, the domain-specific jargon of (video)gaming, and current trends in e-laughter.

While designed for first- or second-semester freshmen (and the majority of our students fall into this category), the course is also taken by juniors and seniors who need elective hours prior to graduation. LING 2050 is usually the first and only linguistics class that the students take as part of their undergraduate experience, especially given that our institution does not offer a degree or certificate in linguistics. Unlike other introductory courses, LING 2050 does not serve as a recruiting course for a specific program, although if a linguistics major or minor were ever offered on our campus, the course could also fulfill that function. As of now, though, it is simply a general education course offered to nonmajors.

At the time we were creating LING 2050, our institution had very recently become independent from its flagship, having received its accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges in June 2013. As the university

began recruiting more traditional four-year students, the need for more freshman- and sophomore-level course offerings became readily apparent. Especially needed were courses that could be counted toward the forty-two-credit-hour general education curriculum mandated by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. The Texas legislature enacted this curriculum in 2014 'to ensure that Texas undergraduate students enrolled in public institutions of higher education will develop the essential knowledge and skills they need in order to be successful in college, in a career, in their communities, and in life' (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2018:3), as well as to allow for easier transferring of lower-level credits between public institutions.

2.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES. It is important to note that in the State of Texas, general education requirements have been rebranded as the 'Texas General Education Core Curriculum', though frequently referred to as the Texas Core and abbreviated as TCC. This label does not imply that students must take a prescribed set of courses, but rather that classes designated as 'core courses' must meet specific learning objectives. A core course must be approved under one of the nine foundational component areas (e.g. Communication, Creative Arts, Mathematics, etc.), with a syllabus that aligns with set learning objectives. Every course—regardless of component area—must include both critical thinking and communication skills as two of its required learning outcomes. The remaining SLOs are determined by component area. For instance, for any core course fulfilling the communication component, the syllabus must have SLOs related to critical thinking skills (CT), communication skills (COMM), teamwork, and personal responsibility. A course in the Social and Behavioral Sciences component area will still need CT and COMM, but its other required SLOs are empirical & quantitative skills and social responsibility.

This type of general education curriculum is considered a 'distribution-plus' model in that it has the features of a typical distribution model (i.e. broad categories that students can pick from within) paired with other criteria such as common SLOs (Jaschick 2016). Traditional distribution models have been heavily criticized for their 'cafeteria-style' approach to education (e.g. Bailey et al. 2015). The American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued a report in 2010 in which they criticized this model, lamenting that '[a]t Northwestern University, the Formal Studies requirement—a broader name for mathematics at many colleges—can be met with courses on music theory and Slavonic linguistics' (2010:9). Opponents of this model fear that with so many options, a student is likely to end up with an eclectic and disjointed curriculum that lacks coherence—one that ultimately will impact the student's effectiveness in the workforce. Their report concludes that allowing these broad choices is a disservice to students because 'job descriptions may vary, but the skills and knowledge that come from a solid general education equip graduates with the flexibility to adapt to a changing job market' (ibid., 6).

In part because of these types of criticisms, many higher-education institutions are moving away from the distribution model and instead are adopting distribution-plus models with common SLOs, similar to the Texas Core Curriculum. A 2015 survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) showed that the percentage of colleges utilizing a distribution-only model decreased by nearly 50% since 2008. The new standard for American higher educational institutions is to employ the distribution-plus model, with 68% of 2015 respondents reporting its use (AAC&U 2016).

To illustrate how Texas utilizes the distribution-plus model, Table 1 defines each component area and its corresponding objectives.

X = required core objectives; blank = optional core objectives

FOUNDATIONAL COMPONENT AREA	Critical Thinking	Commu- nication	Empirical & Quant. Skills	Teamwork	Social Responsibility	Personal Responsibility
Language, Philosophy, & Culture	X	X			X	X
Social & Behavioral Sciences	X	X	X		X	
Mathematics	X	X	X			
Life & Physical Sciences	X	X	X	X		
Creative Arts	X	X		X	X	
Communication	X	X		X		X
American History	X	X			X	X
Government & Political Science	X	X			X	X
Component Area Option	X	X				

TABLE 1. Texas Coordinating Board foundational component areas (adapted from Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2019).

In 2013, we applied to our state's higher-education agency asking that The Language of Now become a core course in the component area of Language, Philosophy, and Culture (LP&C),[1] and upon approval we offered the course for the first time in Fall 2014. As part of the curriculum regulations set by the state, students are only required to take one three-hour course to fulfill the LP&C component. Other choices within the LP&C component include literature courses (e.g. British Literature, Western Civilization, World Cultures), foreign language courses, and introductory courses to fields of study such as philosophy, ethics, and world religions. The distribution-plus model ensures that regardless of which LP&C course a student takes—be it linguistics or otherwise—they will acquire the same competencies in critical thinking, communications, and so forth.

In our analysis for this article, we focus on three such competencies: critical thinking, information literacy, and inquiry and analysis. We selected these three from the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, which are widely used in the assessment of US undergraduate programs. VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) is part of the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, which aims to champion the importance of liberal arts education. The TCC centers on six of LEAP's essential learning objectives (ELOs), which were developed and field-tested by a nationwide group of scholars and which represent the skills needed to successfully complete a degree in any discipline (Rhodes 2009). The LEAP ELOs informed the development of the Texas Core Objectives and the Texas Core Curriculum. Serving as the basis for the VALUE rubrics, these ELOs are 'used individually or collectively to engage in both discipline-specific and skill-specific teacher-student conversations' (Carter 2017).

While some may question the appropriateness of including certain academic disciplines in general education curricula, we have found that linguistics courses—and crucially the SLOs and assignments therein—are well aligned with state and national standards. The knowledge and skills developed in a typical linguistics course are the same ones considered to form part of a high-quality general education and touted by would-be employers (National Research Council 2012, National Association of Col-

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[1] The Language of Now course could have easily fit in the Social and Behavioral Sciences component as well, but since we had planned to seek approval for more LING courses in the future, we wanted to strategically situate particular courses in different component areas. In Fall 2019, the course officially changed designations to a Social and Behavioral Sciences core course.

leges and Employers 2018). Thus, the distribution-plus model is of great benefit to our profession as it allows us to make strong arguments that LING courses are just as effective at cultivating student success as other courses that we might 'compete' against.

The following sections review the syllabus for The Language of Now, highlight some of the signature assignments in the course, and explain how the SLOs of one particular assignment are aligned with nationally recognized core-curriculum competencies. Given that Texas's state standards are derived from the AAC&U's national standards and that we want to make our experience as generalizable to as many linguists as possible, we frame our argument using only the national standards, with the understanding that in doing so, we are simultaneously demonstrating alignment with state standards. The assignment we present as a case study is an inquiry-based research project that asks students to focus on their use of the text-messaging discourse marker *lol*.

3. Linguistic innovation.

3.1. Course syllabus and signature assignments. Given that common SLOs are the hallmark of a distribution-plus model, in any core-course application to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the applicant must identify at least one signature assignment and explain how it assesses the SLOs. While a syllabus is also provided as part of the application, the assignments themselves provide better evidence of alignment to the objectives. This approach is rooted in the theory of backward design, popularized by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), in which an instructor considers the end goal (i.e. what students are expected to be able to do) prior to deciding which topics, lessons, or instructional techniques will best facilitate mastery. While a syllabus gives information about how and when students will receive information, the assessments ensure fidelity to the end-goal expectations set out in the course objectives. This means that for any linguistics course to make a strong case for its inclusion in a general education curriculum, it must be able to align signature assignments to the core objectives. Before analyzing one specific signature assignment from The Language of Now, however, we would like to briefly address the overall organization of the course.

While we have taught The Language of Now in a variety of configurations and modalities, including an abbreviated summer version, a regular sixteen-week semester, an online and hybrid version, and as a traditional face-to-face course, the syllabus included with the online supplemental materials is the sixteen-week online iteration and includes a summary of each of the thirty modules.[2]

We spend the first half of the semester covering basic sociolinguistic topics such as language variation, sociolects, regional dialects, slang, and prescriptivism. The second half of the semester shifts focus to the history and future of the English language, including the role that linguistic borrowing has played throughout history, how new words enter the language, and the significance of overt and covert prestige in language change. While this may sound like a typical sociolinguistics course, we have overlaid each of these topics with examples and activities that are centered around internet language and trending linguistic phenomena. For example, when we talk about linguistic borrowing, we frame this information through the borrowing of emoji (both the icons and the word itself) from Japanese. When we discuss prescriptivism, students complete a research report on whether texting is hurting or helping young people's abilities in English spelling and grammar.

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[2] The supplemental materials referenced here and elsewhere can be accessed at http://muse.jhu.edu /resolve/99.

When we designed the course, we purposely steered away from traditional activities and assessments. Instead, each week students engage content in a new way, often in inquiry-based assignments. As is typical with inquiry-based learning, we present a guiding question at the outset of the activity, but instead of simply giving the answer right away, we lead students through a series of exercises that allows them to uncover the answer on their own by making and remaking hypotheses, by comparing these hypotheses to data sets, and through our gradually releasing additional information throughout the process to help guide student thinking. This builds suspense and engagement, as students become invested in answering the driving question and in examining the evidence from all sides.

One example of this pedagogy can be seen in the assignments related to the topic 'the history of the English language'. Instead of beginning with an overview history lecture covering the Norman invasion all the way to e-languages, the students instead start with an internet scavenger hunt to discover the origin of the slang term *boojie*, which most college-aged students are familiar with due to a popular rap song called 'Bad and boujee'. The hunt is written as a first-person narrative in which the students role-play as if they are lexicographers. At the end of the assignment, they are asked to write a mock email to their boss synthesizing all of the information they learned. As students navigate through resources of varying degrees of credibility, from the *Urban dictionary* to the *Oxford English dictionary* (*OED*), they discover that *boojie/boujee* is actually a clipping of the French borrowing *bourgeois*, which dates back to the 1600s. Allowing students to uncover this information on their own sets the stage for them to analyze the origins of other seemingly new words and to better appreciate the role of loanwords in the history of English.

The *boojie* assignment meets the criteria for a signature assignment because, in addition to being a summative assessment to determine content mastery of the unit's information, it can also be used to justify the claim that the course meets the common SLOs required of general education courses in our state. In the next section, we detail how another such assignment specifically meets the learning objectives of critical thinking, information literacy, and inquiry and analysis. We start by explaining the structure of the assignment itself and then discuss how students demonstrate mastery of the core competencies through this assessment.

3.2. *LOL* ASSIGNMENT CONTENT. The *lol* project is one of the signature assignments in The Language of Now and generally unfolds over a period of three to four weeks. We use the inquiry-based approach detailed in the previous section. This approach employs a somewhat circuitous path to ultimately answer the driving questions: 'What does *lol* mean?' and 'Is it dying out or just changing?'. While we have used different versions of this assignment every semester we have taught the course, the data presented is from students enrolled during Fall and Spring of 2016. All participants (*n* = 94) were undergraduate nonlinguistics majors and gave consent for us to analyze their work. Below, we detail the five parts of the assignment. The full assignment and accompanying rubric are available in the supplemental materials.

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC AND DRIVING QUESTIONS. The first piece of information given to students is a 2015 *New Yorker* article in which the author speculates that perhaps *haha* is a more masculine form of e-laughter (Larson 2015). We then point them to a Facebook blog that took note of the Larson (2015) article and followed up with a less anecdotal approach by 'analyz[ing] de-identified posts and comments posted on Facebook in the last week of May [2015] with at least one string of characters matching

laughter' (Adamic et al. 2015). In reading this second article, students realize that the anecdotal accounts highlighted in the *New Yorker* article do not match up with the empirical data provided by Facebook and also that e-laughter variants tend to be influenced by gender, region, and age.

After reading these two articles, students are asked to examine their own text messages and compare their e-laughter frequency to the trends of social variation identified by Facebook. One theme that emerges is that students are surprised to learn that Facebook reports a relatively low frequency of *lol* usage as compared to other variants such as emoji. Students often conclude that their personal usage must be an anomaly or outlier, given that they tend to use *lol* more frequently than other e-laughter variants.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM. This dissonance between the Adamic et al. (2015) findings and students' personal findings provides the framework needed for the next phase in the class's collective inquiry. We present them with some of the 2015 news article headlines that were published after the release of the Facebook data, and note that news outlets all over the US began reporting that *lol* was dying (see Chowdhry 2015, Macaluso 2015). We then ask: Are people in our part of the country really that unique and atypical in their e-laughter usage, or could something else be going on?

To answer this question, we require students to evaluate three recent text conversations where they used *lol* and to share their own rationale for what motivated them to use *lol* in this context. We also ask them to consider which variant of *lol* they were using (i.e. uppercase, lowercase, all caps, nonstandard spelling, another variant such as *LMAO*) and also to provide a rating on a scale of 1–10 of how funny they found the utterance or conversation that prompted their e-laughter usage. Students share their analysis in groups so that they can compare and contrast their usage with their classmates' findings. Students tend to conclude that while they do sometimes use *lol* to signal humor, they more often tend to use it for other purposes. Although the descriptions of the nonhumorous uses are usually couched in layperson's terms such as 'It's just a filler' or 'I use it to keep the conversation from being so dry', there is a growing awareness that the meaning of *lol* may extend beyond e-laughter.

REFRAMING VIA LINGUISTIC THEORY. At this point in the assignment, we introduce the linguistic concept of discourse markers. Students are asked to read through a bibliography provided by the instructor that includes the popular McWhorter TED Talk and article (2013a,b) where he makes the case that *lol* can now actually be considered a pragmatic particle. Armed with this knowledge, group members are asked to reanalyze their own data on *lol*, using the readings as a guide. Students begin to understand that in many instances they are using *lol* to perform a common discourse function such as topic management or mitigation, although they often report newly emergent, if not idiosyncratic, pragmatic functions as well.

Importantly, in this part of the assignment we revisit the original Facebook research that was the springboard for our initial inquiry. We ask the students to consider why the rate of *lol* on Facebook would be declining while a different trend is occurring in another form of digital media such as texting. Students hypothesize that Facebook interactions have different norms from texting interactions, which we then affirm by explaining the difference between asynchronous (Facebook) and synchronous (texting) communication and the role that discourse markers perform in synchronous communication in both face-to-face and online contexts.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROBLEM IN A BROADER NARRATIVE. At the conclusion of the discourse marker discussion, students have a fuller understanding of the current

meanings and functions of *lol*, but they still need to contextualize this information within the broader narrative of how words change over time. To accomplish this task, they are given sources with varying degrees of credibility (i.e. *Wikipedia*, *OED*, *Washington Post*, *Seattle Times*) that address the origins and etymology of *lol*, but with conflicting information.

Each student is given one source to study in depth, to summarize, and to share with a small group. This activity is structured in the typical jigsaw style in which students become an expert on one piece of the material, with the objective of then combining their area of expertise with others in the group to create a cohesive whole. Because each student will be reporting a slightly different history of *lol*, the group must then triangulate the data to determine the most probable etymology.

Synthesizing information and answering driving questions. In the final portion of the assignment, students are asked to write an essay about *lol*. The essay's purpose is to answer the original driving questions of the inquiry: 'What does *lol* mean?' and 'Is it dying out or just changing?'. The essay must address the history, current meaning, and future of *lol*, and it requires students to present data from the class data set as evidence and/or counterevidence for their argument. Success on this assignment is dependent on being able to synthesize all of the knowledge acquired in the previous parts of the assignment, and it is thus used as a summative assessment. All of the previous portions of the assignment are assessed as well, but since they are considered formative assessments, their weight toward the final course grade is significantly smaller.

3.3. Alignment: developing universal competencies through linguistics content. To build a case that the *lol* assignment aligns with state and/or national standards of general education, we need to more closely examine the SLOs that are the intended outcomes of students engaging in this work. As would be expected in a linguistics course of this nature, there are some key content objectives that are related specifically to (socio)linguistics, such as recognizing the functions of discourse markers and evaluating whether those functions are being utilized in a data set. While we as linguists find these concepts foundational to understanding the discipline, content objectives such as these do not support the inclusion of linguistics in a general education curriculum. Instead, the focus must be on the SLOs that are universal to any general education course—the objectives that, regardless of whether a student takes a foreign language course, a literature course, or a philosophy course, they will still develop the same or similar competencies. As Hanstedt (2018:1) states, 'it's not just about what students study, but how and why. Students should have opportunities to work across the disciplines and develop powerful, transferable skills in a lot of different areas'.

In our analysis below, we focus on three such transferable skills: information literacy, critical thinking, and inquiry and analysis. Critical thinking is a competency that tends to be especially salient, as it not only is integrated into national and state rubrics but is also the top competency listed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers in their definition of career readiness. Their *Job outlook 2018* report provides evidence that critical thinking is the top essential need cited by would-be employers. Thus, any assignment that can provide evidence that it is developing critical thinking skills in students not only is adding to a high-quality liberal education but is also an assignment that supports the development of the twenty-first-century skills that employers seek.

In the *lol* assignment detailed above, competency in the areas of information literacy, critical thinking, and inquiry and analysis is developed in two ways: (i) through the pedagogical structure of the assignment itself, and (ii) through the linguistic analysis per-

formed by students throughout each of the five parts of the assignment. We speak first to the pedagogy employed in the assignment and second to the students' analyses.

COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT VIA PEDAGOGY. Throughout the *lol* assignment, key pedagogical choices were made that align with specific intended outcomes, meaning that the assignment is designed in such a way to guide students toward mastery of the information literacy and critical thinking SLOs. For instance, the AAC&U defines *information literacy* as 'the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively and responsibly use and share that information for the problem at hand' (2009b). Information literacy is seen in the part of the *lol* assignment where students triangulate sources related to the etymology of *lol*. While we certainly could have given students free reign on the internet to find their own sources, by giving them a limited number with strategic differences related to the origins of *lol* (e.g. the *OED* dates the term to 1989 but another news article cites a mid-1980s origin in a Canadian bulletin board system), it allows the instructor the opportunity to assess how well students are able to synthesize the information given and prioritize credibility.

The *lol* assignment structure also lends itself to gains in the area of critical thinking. Table 2 is an excerpt from the VALUE rubric for this competency (AAC&U 2009a). The excerpt includes the five dimensions that encompass critical thinking as well as the corresponding descriptors for the level 3 milestone. Level 3 milestones assume that the student has hit key benchmarks but has not yet fully achieved mastery, which is level 4. The level 3 milestone would be consistent with the target audience for the *lol* assignment. The second dimension in the table, EVIDENCE, indicates that the 'viewpoints of experts are subject to questioning'. In the first part of the *lol* assignment, students are initially given a *New Yorker* article and Facebook research that was produced as a response to *The New Yorker*. Our initial purpose in supplying these two sources is to help students see the value of empirical evidence, given that the *New Yorker* piece makes conjectures about e-laughter trends that are largely based on anecdotal experiences. This is a bit of intentional misdirection on the instructor's part, however, because as we progress through the assignment, we also call into question the legitimacy of the Facebook research. Although ultimately we conclude that the Facebook research is solid (though misinterpreted by media outlets as the end of *lol* entirely, when *lol* really appears to only be diminished in frequency in asynchronous contexts), the assignment intentionally compels students to question expert viewpoints throughout.

CT DIMENSIONS	MILESTONE 3
1. Explanation of issues	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated, described, and clarified so that understanding is not seriously impeded by omissions.
2. Evidence	Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/ evaluation to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are subject to questioning.
3. Influence of context and assumptions	Identifies own and others' assumptions and several relevant contexts when presenting a position.
4. Student's position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis)	Specific position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) takes into account the complexities of an issue. Others' points of view are acknowledged within position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis).
5. Conclusions and related outcomes (implications and consequences)	Conclusion is logically tied to a range of information, including opposing viewpoints; related outcomes (consequences and implications) are identified clearly.

TABLE 2. Excerpt from milestone 3 from the AAC&U (2009a) critical thinking rubric.

The fourth dimension of critical thinking—STUDENT'S POSITION—is similarly developed. This dimension requires that a student's thesis 'take into account the complexities of an issue'. As students move through the assignment, they realize that their initial hypothesis about what is happening with *lol* must be revised. They move from a position of believing that they are unique in their own usage of *lol* to discovering that many others also use *lol* as a discourse marker. Yet even within that discovery, they find that discourse markers themselves have a variety of functions, and that what a person means when they use *lol* is highly context-specific. Had we used a more typical deductive approach to this assignment wherein the instructor simply defines a discourse marker, gives some examples, and perhaps mentions that *lol* is now functioning as one, the students would not have been able to fully embrace the complexities of the topic. Allowing them to make predictions, revise previously held conceptions, and trudge through the messiness of determining what *lol* actually means in any given conversation positions them to create a more comprehensive thesis in the summative assessment.

A final example of critical thinking is tied to the fifth dimension, CONCLUSIONS AND RELATED OUTCOMES. The performance descriptor for this dimension states that 'conclusions [should be] logically tied to a range of information, including opposing viewpoints'. One of our motivations for designing this as a group project with a collective class data set is that it enables students to see that not everyone uses *lol* in the same way. Every semester, we have students in the class who do not use *lol* at all or use it only in very limited circumstances, often with the traditional intent of denoting actual laughter. We also have students who strongly believe that all caps *LOL* denotes actual laughter while lowercase *lol* does not. Others disagree. Some make that same distinction by 'upgrading' to *lmao* (lit. 'laughing my ass off') if they are intending to communicate actual laughter instead of polite acknowledgment of irony and/or humor. Were this assignment performed individually instead of as a group, students would not be exposed to this range of perspectives about the meaning of *lol*. Thus, the pedagogy itself is setting up a scenario for students to deepen their ability to think critically about these issues.

COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT VIA LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS. While the pedagogy employed in this assignment lends itself well to information literacy and critical thinking SLOs, it is not necessarily true that all linguistics assignments are similarly structured and can thus make a case for their inclusion in a general education curriculum based on pedagogy alone. We would argue, however, that linguistic projects in undergraduate courses tend to be amenable to inquiry-based approaches to learning. Yet even in cases of more formal linguistic work, the process of organizing and analyzing language data that are driven by a workable research question develops competence in a number of the nationally aligned standards, specifically those supporting the development of inquiry and analysis (I&A). The VALUE rubric defines the two areas as follows: 'Inquiry is a systematic process of exploring issues/objects/works through the collection and analysis of evidence that result in informed conclusions/judgments. Analysis is the process of breaking complex topics or issues into parts to gain a better understanding of them' (AAC&U 2009c).

The assignment identifies a manageable topic—pragmatic functions of a discourse maker—and encourages students to consider the different aspects of meaning making through the use of *lol*, specifically, as a phatic text in the absence of paralinguistic communication (see dimension 1 in Table 3).

The second dimension of the I&A rubric—existing knowledge, research, and/or views—calls for students to 'present in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches'. To illustrate the type of work we tend to re-

I&A DIMENSIONS	MILESTONE 3
1. Topic selection	Identifies a focused and manageable/doable topic that appropriately addresses relevant aspects of the topic.
2. Existing knowledge, research, and/or views	Presents in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.
3. Design process	Critical elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are appropriately developed; however, more subtle elements are ignored or unaccounted for.
4. Analysis	Organizes evidence to reveal important patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus.
5. Conclusions	States a conclusion focused solely on the inquiry findings. The conclusion arises specifically from and responds specifically to the inquiry findings.
6. Limitations and implications	Discusses relevant and supported limitations and implications.

TABLE 3. Excerpt from milestone 3 from the AAC&U (2009c) inquiry and analysis rubric.

ceive, we have provided an abridged excerpt from one of our students who synthesized a *BBC News* article written by their economic correspondent, James Morgan. The student accurately summarizes Morgan's claims and then compares them to other relevant sources, such as the *OED* and research on Facebook that Morgan himself cites. We bold the phrases where the student succeeded in representing various viewpoints and characterizing the particular assertions about *lol* from different sources.

> Why did LOL infiltrate the language? This is a question that **James Morgan attempts to answer in an article written in 2011** … It has become so widely used that it has been entered **into the prestigious Oxford English Dictionary**. It is defined by the OED as 'an interjection' used chiefly in electronic communications … 'to draw attention to a joke or humorous statement, or to express amusement' (Morgan 2011) … As the term became popular and the older generation started to catch on, **they began to interpret the acronym, in ways that made sense to them, even though it may not have been intended for such a way**. One thing that most people are in agreement on, is the fact that **the term 'is simple and multipurpose' (Morgan 2011)**. There have been many **debates of whether the alteration of the English language with LOL and terms of the sort is ruining the language. Morgan does not believe** this to be true. He provides for the reader many comments from sources such as Facebook, that speak in favor of the term, as well as comments by those that are in opposition of the term, or as Morgan calls them, **'anti-LOL groups,'** as not to show bias. He also makes reference to **the fact that the kids feel as though this is their language,** for their usage only.

In developing the *lol* assignment, we were cognizant of the fact that the study of discourse markers—specifically the robust literature on research that had already been conducted on *lol* (from conversation analysis, computer-mediated communication, and discourse analysis)—had the potential to overwhelm our students with information that would have been too detailed for the scope of this project. Most of our students are in their first or second years at the university and enrolled in a 2000-level general education course without any prerequisites in Linguistics or English. A review of some of the academic publications on the topic would have been daunting even for a graduate student, let alone a newcomer to the field.

By piloting different sources, we discovered that the most effective tool to prepare students for this type of analysis was a module we created based on a general treatment of discourse markers: Carter et al. 2011 and some of the points that McWhorter (2013a) makes in his TED talk. This module intends to help students organize what they are observing in their data and gives them the vocabulary to describe conversation turns as well as connections to recognizable features in their respective speech/texting communities. After reviewing the module and the other anecdotal and empirical sources for this project, students understand that *lol* can be used to organize sequences in a story (e.g. to hold the floor), manage a conversation (e.g. change topics), convey messages in

a less direct manner (e.g. softeners, hedging), show that we are listening (e.g. a response token), and express attitude (e.g. how you are understanding the events detailed through texting/talking).

Analysis of the data set, collected and shared during the group segment of this assignment, establishes a strong connection to the fourth dimension of the I&A rubric, ANALYSIS. Here students gather more evidence that their nonhumorous use of e-laughter corroborates the main arguments in the body of research, in that *lol* is widely used to manage the topic in a text conversation and to soften a range of statements and speech acts (e.g. requests, favors, invitations, clarifications). In doing so, they demonstrate that they can utilize the scaffolds provided to them by the instructor to broaden their understanding of why and how they use *lol*. Often prior to receiving the scaffolds, students report their usage in vague and general terms such as 'I use lol to keep the conversation from being so boring'. By looking at their data again through a new lens, they are ultimately able to see their use as patterned and much more nuanced than simply keeping a conversation from 'feeling dull'.

In examples 1–3, we reproduce the texting tokens as well as an abbreviated analysis that students provided to link the pragmatic functions of *lol* to those described by the selected readings in class.

(1) Topic management
  Me: Why do you and your sister look so much alike?
  Friend: Haha we used to look nothing alike. She's grown up into looking like my little twin LOL.
  Me: LOL … So Devin and I were talking about Thursday next week grabbing a beer. Does that work?
  Friend: That sounds perfect!

Excerpt of student's analysis: 'That second *LOL* was also used as a conversation ender and subject changer because of the plans made to grab a beer later that next week.'

(2) Conversation closing
  Me: Morning
  Eva: Hru
  Me: Okay
       Kinda
       U?
  Eva: What's wrong
  Me: U don't wanna know lol

Excerpt of student's analysis: 'It was more of me being embarrassed to tell her that I was "sick" at work. I believe the goal for this *lol* or pragmatic particle was to end the conversation.'

(3) Softener
  Wife: ugh! I have to run errands for my mom
  Me: lol mama's girl
  Wife: I know lol

Excerpt of student's analysis: 'I use lol in a sense as a softener so she will not think I believe it's bad to be a mama's girl. It was intended as a joke and not an insult.'

While our students' analyses generally align with the taxonomy from recent research studies (e.g. *lol* as a response token, softener, sequence organizer, topic manager), a number of their interpretations are more nuanced than the research would suggest. In our first semester using this assignment, we observed that some students offered het-

erodox interpretations of the different pragmatic meanings of *lol* in their text messages. Having reservations about the stability and wider circulation of their interpretations among other texters, we examined recent publications on the topic, which are summarized in the appendix. While this summary of relevant work would not form part of the course reading materials for our undergraduate students, we nonetheless found value in having this information when we were developing and teaching the course, as some of the more detailed accounts of *lol* helped inform us when responding to the students' assorted analyses. In most cases, how the students were using this discourse marker, and the descriptions they provided in their assignments, were corroborated by the results of recent linguistic studies.

Yet we also found that many students' *lol* tokens index previous discursive events with a particular interlocutor, which suggests that *lol* takes on a different range of meanings with different individuals. One of the conclusions we encourage our students to develop centers on the circulatory practices of interpreting meaning(s) in context and performing targeted meaning(s) in new ones, as is required in dimension 5 of the I&A rubric. In order for us to manage and manipulate language as a communicative resource in new domains, a competence for negotiated meaning in various social fields will need to be both valued and developed. It is for this reason that metalinguistic discourse about texting (e.g. a pragmatic analysis of *lol*) appears to resonate with students' engagement with their conceptual understanding of language use. The students are describing the pragmatic functions that they consider salient with regard to texting competence, digital identities, and their own linguistic repertoires.

Many students will ultimately discover pragmatic uses that are not addressed in any of the readings in class or through their general internet searches on the topic. Acknowledging such incongruity is in fact articulated in the last dimension of the I&A rubric: LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS. Encouraged to point out new and emergent pragmatic meanings in our class, students employ whatever analytic and descriptive resources they have to map out what they are accomplishing pragmatically with the *lol* discourse marker. Below are just two of several examples.

(4) Students' analysis: exclamation mark

> Me: Ok good.. we can go look at Galveston too I heard it's pretty and I wanna go to bubba gumps lol
> Her: Yea mom said there is another place too she wants to go and it will be a Saturday night
> Me: Oh yeah so we might can hit a bar lol
> Her: Lol yes that's what I'm thinking

Excerpt of student's analysis: 'I felt the need to say "Lol" after Bubba Gumps because I was excited about going because it is one of my favorite restaurants. But we were not face to face so I added it to let her know I was excited. I used "lol" at the end of the bar sentence to express my decision. It was kinda signaled to mean "I'm in" so-to-speak.'

(5) Students' analysis: seriousness

> Me: We need to go grocery shopping
> GF: yes we do we haven't in a while lol
> Me: All we have is pizza, cereal, and taquitos in the fridge
> GF: lol that is how we survive
> Me: Lol yes I know but I'm tired of eating all this unhealthy stuff it hurting my tummy
> GF: I know

     Me: we need to get veggies and stuff lol
     GF: I know

Excerpt of student's analysis: 'I was letting my girlfriend know that we needed to go grocery shopping because we had ran out of grocery's at the house and I used lol when I told her my tummy was hurting from eating all the unhealthy food not because it was funny but <u>so she knows I'm being for real</u>, and I used lol again when I told her we needed veggies and stuff <u>because I was being serious</u>.'

Considering that the etymology of *lol* references a locution of laughing, it may seem anomalous to observe an emergent pattern that signals the opposite illocution: 'I'm serious about what I just said'. In 5, the student accurately describes how his use of *lol* is helping GF interpret his texts and meets the benchmark of identifying the limitations of previous research. The path that leads students to recognize the implications and limitations will also prepare them to comprehend the more technical discussions on the topic, such as the conversation-analytic research on face-to-face laughter. As a case in point, some recent work has highlighted how audible laughter in oral conversations is used by interactants to manage nonhumorous conversation segments. With the student already observing his own use of 'serious' forms of e-laughter, he may be prepared to conceptualize Jefferson (1984:367), who argues that laughter in face-to-face conversations is an interactional resource for organizing talk that might be 'troubles-resistive', in that a speaker's courage in the face of serious matters may be performed through laughter. In a sense, the students who are providing insightful analyses of their (and their classmates') deployment of e-laughter in text messages are participating in a parallel research community with similar types of analyses. While the *lol* assignment may be an exercise in Pragmatics 101, a student's recognition of the limitations in their own project and/or published research may be the impetus for a new project in the future. If nothing else, students are equipped with the tools to debunk a number of findings reported on various internet web pages that are based on little more than personal experience and anecdotal evidence.

3.4. DISCUSSION. We have identified how, in both pedagogy and content, an original assignment about discourse markers aligns with the nationally acclaimed competencies of information literacy, critical thinking, and inquiry and analysis. While we have presented data from a sociolinguistics course, we have done so merely as an example or template of how the case can be made that signature assignments in linguistics meet common SLOs in general education courses. Indeed, many existing linguistics assignments, such as phonology problem sets or constructed language projects, are already structured in a way that fosters inquiry, analysis, and critical thinking. For the most part, it is simply a matter of documenting how and where those skills are incorporated into the course in order to make a strong justification for inclusion in general education curricula. In other cases, small pedagogical adjustments such as incorporating an inquiry-based assignment structure can strengthen a linguistics course proposal.

In our home state of Texas, this notion is beginning to slowly spread, as we have seen a modest uptick in linguistics courses in general education. Five years ago, when we first proposed that The Language of Now be included as part of the Texas core curriculum, we were one of only nine courses with a LING prefix (or with linguistics in the course title) to be offered as part of the core. These courses were offered across only four institutions, three of which already have dedicated linguistics programs.

In 2018, the number of courses has grown from nine to fifteen. While this growth is encouraging, these fifteen courses are just a drop in the bucket, given that nearly 12,000

general education courses are offered across the state of Texas each year. Plus, we have not added any additional participating institutions, meaning that the growth is accounted for by the same institutions simply offering more core courses with LING prefixes. This means that colleagues in linguistics both in Texas and across the country may not yet realize the advantages that the distribution-plus model has to offer our field.

In the Language, Philosophy, and Culture component area of the TCC, there were 1,463 courses offered as of Fall 2018. Of these, two are LING courses. One is ours, The Language of Now, while the other is Language in Multicultural USA at the University of Texas at Arlington. LING courses represent less than 0.1% of course offerings in this general education component area. In comparison, there are 537 courses (36.7%) with an English prefix, all of which are literature courses. Likewise, there are 262 leveled foreign language courses, such as Intermediate Japanese and Intro to Sign Language. These comprise 17.9% of the component area, and these numbers do not even include all of the nonleveled foreign language courses such as Intro to Spanish and Latin American Literature. While linguistics courses are also offered in the Social and Behavioral Sciences component area, the breakdown is alarmingly similar, with linguistics heavily underrepresented in this area as well.

Despite this underrepresentation, the knowledge and skills developed in a typical linguistics course positively contribute to strong general education curricula (Sharp et al. 2011) and foster career-readiness experiences sought out by would-be employers (National Research Council 2012:54). Although we have presented data from a more sociolinguistics-leaning course, the same concepts could be applied to any linguistics subdiscipline, such as syntax, phonology, or applied linguistics. Since a portion of English or foreign language general education courses are likely already taught by linguists who ended up in other departments but who may not have the opportunity to teach within their linguistics specializations, we encourage linguists from different backgrounds and training to consider whether the move in higher education toward common SLOs could open opportunities at their own institutions both for themselves and for the field as a whole.

In our case, a general education course had the practical benefit of being able to justify the creation of a new faculty line in linguistics at our university. Perhaps more importantly though, it has yielded the opportunity to spread public awareness of relevant linguistic issues to future police officers, physicians, public school educators, lawyers, business professionals, and so forth, all of whom are entering the workforce not only as strong critical thinkers but also armed with new perspectives on grammar, linguistic discrimination, language learning, language change, and many other commonly misunderstood topics.

APPENDIX: ABRIDGED SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON *LOL* AS A DISCOURSE MARKER

LAUGHTER IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
- How expectations are negotiated and maintained in a texting interaction is largely pragmatic and depends on contextual factors and conventions established through prior interactions among the interlocutors.
- Text messaging is synchronous, near-synchronous, and asynchronous (Yates 1996, Tagliamonte & Denis 2008).
- One principle challenge of synchronous texting is the lack of paralinguistic communication (e.g. facial expressions, tone, voice pitch, tempo) that tends to accompany interactions where voice and physical gestures support the interpretation of an utterance (O'Neill 2010, McWhorter 2013a,b, Petitjean & Morel 2017).
- Face-to-face laughter and other representations of laughter function as a nonhumorous conversational resource to manage interactions (Wilkinson 2007, Holt 2010, 2011, 2012, Petitjean & González-

Martínez 2015); why would discourse markers in texting, that is, e-laughter, not serve a similar function?

Lol as discourse marker: conversation management
- Mediates conversational expectations and the management of texting interactions.
- Turn-taking decisions: many texting interlocutors intend to minimize ambiguity when adjacency is disrupted or no longer sequential.
- Accentuates texts the same way that auditory and visual cues do in face-to-face communication (Derks et al. 2007, Provine et al. 2007, O'Neill 2010).
- Expresses the level of interlocutor engagement in the current exchange of messages, similar to phatic fillers in spoken discourse (e.g. *mm-hm*, *yeah*, *okay*, *really*, *I know*) (Baron 2004, Tagliamonte & Denis 2008).
- Organizes turn-taking, attenuates interactional issues, and communicates topic trajectory.
- Functions as an emotional punctuation (Provine et al. 2007).
- Facilitates conversation termination (Holt 2010, McWhorter 2013a,b, Petitjean & Morel 2017).
- Establishes topic trajectory (Glenn & Holt 2013, Petitjean & Morel 2017).
- Serves as a turn-yielding device (Degand & van Bergen 2018).

Lol as discourse marker: social functions
- Aids in constructing an identity as a competent texter and tech-savvy communicator.
- Socially accepted nonhumorous use of *lol* establishes a texter's knowledge of a particular technology platform and, in turn, constructs an identity that authenticates their claim as a competent member of a texting/speech community (Petitjean & Morel 2017).
- Negotiates group membership and promotes social cohesion.
- Reduces intensity and affect in conversations with delicate topics (McWhorter 2013a,b, Petitjean & Morel 2017).
- Conveys accommodation in texting conversations and even solicits empathy (McWhorter 2013a,b).

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