A Wide-Angle View of Prekindergarten Through 12th-Grade Teachers’ Beliefs About Language Correction

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A Wide-Angle View of Prekindergarten Through 12th-Grade Teachers’ Beliefs About Language Correction

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Abstract

This article explores patterns in teachers’ reported correction of student language use in speech and writing. The authors use the concept of language correction in student writing and student speech as a proxy for prescriptive approaches to teaching about language. By conducting a large-scale survey of all language and literacy teachers from preschool through 12th grade across an entire state, the authors were able to identify patterns in teachers’ approaches to teaching about language that smaller case studies and nuanced qualitative studies have not yet documented. They examine differences in teachers’ self-reported correction of student language use across teacher characteristics and contexts such as grade levels taught, regions of the state, years of teaching experience, and whether teachers had taken a linguistics class. The authors identified marked differences in how elementary and secondary teachers report correcting student writing and speech. They found a small but significant difference in the impact of taking a linguistics class depending on grades taught. They note small but significant differences between reported correction of language for teachers in urban and rural contexts. They discuss implications for professional development on teaching about language targeted to the needs of teachers based on grade level, context, and experience.

Keywords: grammar teaching, language correction, language ideologies

This article explores patterns in teachers’ reported correction of student language use in speech and writing. Historically language correction has been associated with prescriptive approaches to grammar and language teaching that privilege students, predominantly White mainstream students, who already use language in ways that align with the prevailing expectations of schools (Alim, 2010). Increasingly, our linguistically diverse society calls for a critically oriented and linguistically grounded approach to grammar/language instruction that moves away from prescriptive correction to a more descriptive linguistic inquiry.
A growing body of scholarship calls for teaching practices to adapt to the wealth of language-minority students in U.S. classrooms, including bilingual learners, heritage language learners, and speakers of historically stigmatized varieties of English (Reaser et al., 2017; Sembiante & Tian, 2020). However, the use of Standard American English (SAE) in U.S. classrooms is typically preferred to other varieties, such as African American English (Adger et al., 2018). The belief that using historically stigmatized varieties of English indicates an inability to express complex thoughts continues to pervade U.S. public schools, and this belief can negatively impact the learning of linguistically diverse students (Ball et al., 2011). Fortunately, teachers’ language ideologies and related pedagogical decisions can change over time (Metz & Knight, 2021).

To design supports for teachers to take up critical, linguistically informed teaching about language, it is important to understand what teachers already know and believe about language use and language instruction. Our goal was to understand patterns in the language beliefs of practicing teachers across grade levels and contexts. Specifically, we asked: How do teachers across different grades and contexts think about the correction of student language use?

This study examined a subset of questions from an extensive survey sent to all language and literacy teachers in an entire state. The survey covered a wide range of beliefs related to teachers’ approach to language and literacy teaching. In this article we examine teachers’ reported correction of student language errors in speech and writing and their reported motivations for correcting student language use. From this large-scale survey, we were able to identify trends in approaches to teaching about language along teacher characteristics and contexts such as grade levels taught, regions of the state, years of teaching experience, and whether teachers had taken a linguistics class.

We identify patterns of difference in teachers’ beliefs about language correction across contexts that may be valuable for future professional development with teachers. For example, early elementary teachers reported less correcting of written language and more correcting of oral language, whereas middle and secondary teachers reported more correction of written language and less correction of oral language.

**Review of Research on Language Ideologies and Teaching About Language**

A growing body of research examines teachers’ beliefs about language teaching through the lens of language ideologies. Language ideologies are beliefs about language as used in social contexts (Kroskrity, 2016). Language ideologies include the associations between types of language use and types of people, including judgments of competence and morality. In the school context, language ideologies include beliefs about what types of language are considered appropriate or academic (Rosa & Burdick, 2017).

Because language teaching is such a broad concept, homing in on specific aspects of teachers’ language beliefs has been a productive approach. A number of scholars have focused on specific contexts and school populations. For example, Baker-Bell (2020a) has studied anti-Black linguistic racism in predominantly African American urban schools, attending to how teachers’ beliefs impact student experiences. Other scholars have examined the language ideologies of teachers in multilingual contexts, considering how beliefs about what language counts in school position students as more or less com-
petent language users (Martinez, 2017; Razfar, 2005).

Much of the existing research has examined language ideologies of individual teachers (Metz, 2018; Mosley Wetzel & Rogers, 2015; Razfar, 2012), giving in-depth views of how teachers negotiate the language practices of their students. Scholars have examined teachers’ language ideologies tied to the teaching of writing at both the elementary (Machado et al., 2017) and high school levels (Orzulak, 2015). Dole et al. (2021) surveyed 196 teachers in upper elementary and middle school to understand their views of grammar, grammar instruction, and its relation to writing. They found a general ambivalence in teachers’ understanding of what grammar is and how it should be taught. Related scholarship has explored the emerging and malleable language ideologies of pre-service teachers (Banes et al., 2016; Godley et al., 2015), with an eye toward how to help new teachers adopt more expansive views of language use for school and a more critical understanding of the social construction of linguistic norms.

Since early survey research on teachers’ language beliefs (Bowie & Bond, 1994; Ford, 1978; Taylor, 1973) there have been limited large-scale studies of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of language use. The National Council of Teachers of English sponsored a nationwide study of high school English teachers’ language knowledge and awareness at the turn of the 21st century (Smitherman & Villanueva, 2000), and more recently Metz (2019) published results of a large-scale survey of high school English teachers’ language ideologies.

Together these studies provide a broad and deep understanding of how teachers think about language use and language teaching. However, the existing research doesn’t provide a comparison across populations of teachers from different grade levels and teaching contexts. This study addressed this need in an effort to provide teacher educators and professional developers with a resource to inform how they approach teaching about language with teachers in different grade levels and contexts. The findings add to the research base by providing a wide-angle view of teachers’ beliefs about language teaching from preschool to Grade 12 in a range of contexts across an entire state.

Theoretical Grounding

Our theoretical grounding builds on concepts of language ideologies tied to Standard English and Academic English. We then consider how those concepts are related to ideas of language correction in schooling. Both of these large concepts are described below.

Standard and Academic English

This study built from a premise that teaching about language in school bears little relation to scientifically based language knowledge grounded in linguistics and sociolinguistics (Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Myhill & Watson, 2014). The majority of school-based language instruction focuses on a narrow view of Standard English or the recently popular term academic English. Traditionally, teachers hold up the constructs of Standard English and academic English as models that students must align with or be corrected. This prescriptive approach to teaching about language, in which teachers search for and
correct errors in student language use, does not follow general linguistic principles that document the natural variation and change in language use (Curzan, 2014). A linguistically informed approach to language study is descriptive, documenting how people actually use language and exploring the underlying patterns that make sense of language use (Mallinson & Charity Hudley, 2013).

The traditional approach to teaching about language use in schools relies on a standard language ideology (Milroy, 2001). The standard language ideology comprises a belief that there is a single pure and correct form of a language and that deviations from that form are errors caused by misunderstanding, inattention, or other deficits. The concept of Standard English arises from the standard language ideology. Although this standardized view of language is demonstrably false, it continues to be taught in schools where student language is corrected to align with the mythical standard.

Academic language is a related social construct that suggests certain ways of using language are inherently superior for conveying the complex ideas discussed in schools (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Although some studies of language use in school contexts and academic texts have shown correlations with particular linguistic features (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Schleppegrell, 2004), others have argued that there is nothing uniquely academic about these features (Flores, 2020). Flores (2020) made the case that the construct of academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology; in short, mainstream White academics have defined the language of their disciplines in their own terms and historically policed the language of racialized others as a method of exclusion. Put differently, academic language is the language used by those perceived to be academic. As social perceptions of who is an academic change, so will conceptions of academic language.

Although many scholars studying academic language acknowledge it as a single register within a larger linguistic repertoire, teachers, administrators, and test-makers often equate it with the language of school (Bunch, 2014; Valdés, 2017). Academic language is juxtaposed with everyday language, informal language or other terms for the language many students use to process ideas (Bunch, 2014). The construct of academic language becomes a symbolic border that separates linguistically marginalized students from academic acceptance (Valdés, 2017).

When it comes to teaching academic language, teachers face a tension between preparing students for the world as it is now, with all the linguistic prejudices built into existing conceptions of academic language, and working to change language expectations for a more inclusive future. The focus on academic language tends toward accommodating existing linguistic prejudice by asking language users to conform to the linguistic expectations of a historically White academic culture (Metz, 2019). An alternative approach is to make students aware of historical linguistic expectations while empowering them to resist and reshape linguistic norms. This approach builds on concepts of critical language awareness and translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2013; Metz, 2023).

For teachers who purport to maintain the status quo, relying on a standard language ideology and existing notions of academic language may suffice. As more and more teachers, especially English teachers, come to understand the inherently political nature of their work (Cochran-Smith, 2010), they realize that the status quo has not
served all students well (Metz, 2022). A different approach to teaching about language use is required to meet the needs of our increasingly linguistically diverse society. Following the pedagogical and theoretical leads from the National Council of Teachers of English resolution on Students’ Right to their Own Language (Perryman-Clark et al., 2014), many teachers are seeking ways to support their linguistically marginalized students.

**Language Correction**

In this study we viewed language correction as an element of a prescriptive approach to language teaching aligned with a standard language ideology. Because linguists have established that all forms of English are patterned, are systematic, and follow clear rules (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015), the correction of oral language use in school settings is less about inherently right and wrong uses of language and more about conformity to cultural/social standards that align with historical patterns of race and class (Baker-Bell, 2020a; Rosa, 2019).

Research on correction in classrooms tends to separate oral from written language use. In the tradition of conversation analysis, correction of oral language use is often referred to as repair (Schegloff et al., 1977). Razfar (2005) highlighted the ideological nature of repair in classroom interactions, demonstrating that correction of student language use (pronunciation, grammar, word choice) serves purposes beyond instruction and can be used to regulate behavior or signal ideologies of appropriateness.

There is a long tradition of language correction in written language. From the extensive studies on writing errors conducted by Mina Shaughnessy (1979) to more recent exploration of dialect-related language correction (Fogel & Ehri, 2000; Marshall, 2018), teachers view the correction of written English as a key component of their job. Even though an increasing number of scholars encourage moving past error correction to focus on students’ choices, style, and general authority as a writer (Myhill et al., 2018), the view that adherence to specific standardized conventions is the most important aspect of school writing persists (Watson, 2015).

Teachers’ understandings of correction have been shown to acknowledge the social component to correction. A study by Metz and Knight (2021) showed that English teachers understand the validity of multiple Englishes but feel a responsibility to correct students’ language use that does not align with standardized English norms. This prescriptive tendency is part of a narrative of the high school English teacher’s role adopted by teachers across contexts (Metz, 2022; Metz & Knight, 2021). Teachers wrestle with the tension that they are tasked with preparing students for the existing linguistic prejudices of the world even though they may hope to eradicate those prejudices. This tension can be resolved by a critical language awareness approach (Alim, 2010; Godley & Minnici, 2008), but many teachers have not been exposed to these ideas. At its root, a critical language awareness approach refers to developing students’ ability to interrogate the intersection of language and power, and to diminish discrimination based on linguistic prejudice (Metz, 2023).
The view that language use must conform to a set of academic conventions coincides with a narrow view of schooling that focuses on preparation for college or career. Teachers often operationalize this as preparation for standardized tests (Metz & Knight, 2021). Pushing past error correction to focus on development of an extensive linguistic repertoire is a way to broaden this narrow purpose for schooling. A more expansive purpose for schooling includes personal growth, development of a life-long love of literacy and learning, enhancement of creative and adaptive communication skills, maturation of a critical perspective that strives toward social equality, and more. These purposes for teaching about language align with a critical language pedagogy and a translanguaging approach that continues to gain traction across domains of schooling (Godley & Reaser, 2018; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018; Sembiante & Tian, 2020).

For this study, we identify teachers’ denial of correction as an element of a descriptive approach to language aligned with more linguistically informed language teaching. Because correction of language use has been established as the norm in most contexts, we view teachers who reported that they do not correct student language use, whether oral or written, as making an active choice as opposed to passively ignoring student language use. For this reason, as we analyze the survey results, we interpret the extent to which teachers reported that they do or do not correct student language and speech as indicative of a more prescriptive or descriptive approach to teaching about language. This correlation is not perfect, but follow-up interviews with teachers support the trend that teachers who indicated they do not correct student errors are making an active choice (Metz & Knight, 2021).

Methods

The study consisted of analysis of a survey given to all public school teachers of literacy and English language arts in the U.S. state of Missouri. Details are provided below.

Data Sample

We invited all elementary (PreK–Grade 5) and secondary (Grades 6–12) literacy/English teachers in Missouri to complete an online survey. Teachers were asked Likert-scale, rank-order, and open-ended questions exploring their beliefs about the teaching of oral and written language. After eliminating unfinished surveys and surveys finished in less than 90 seconds, and otherwise cleaning the data, we retained 1,552 surveys for analysis. Of these surveys, 990 were from early childhood and elementary teachers and 562 from secondary teachers, for a usable response rate of 5% and 11%, respectively.

Teachers came from all regions of the state, from small rural districts and large metropolitan centers. Respondents had varied teaching experience, but the majority of respondents had more than 5 years of teaching experience (82.4%). A significant majority of respondents identified as female (93.4%). Respondents were also mostly White (93.2%). About three percent (2.7%) identified as Black and the next highest identifier was “Other” (1.5%). Because of the demographic makeup of our sample, we do not disaggregate results by race or gender. This is a limitation of the sample. Findings can be interpreted as applying to White female teachers and may not be indicative of the language beliefs of other populations of teachers.
Survey Construction

The survey was constructed by a team of researchers at the Missouri Language and Literacies Center. The survey included a wide variety of questions related to the teaching of language and literacy across multiple grade levels. Details on the complete survey can be found in the Missouri Teacher’s Beliefs About Language and Literacy Teaching Report, at https://education.missouri.edu/learning-teaching-curriculum/mllc/.

The section on the teaching of language contained questions about specific features of language that teachers might be concerned about. The features were drawn from books on common pet peeves in grammar teaching (e.g., Schuster, 2003) and from sociolinguistic works on language regard (e.g., Preston, 2018). In this article we focus on questions about teachers’ practices related to correcting their students’ language usage. We asked teachers how often they make corrections and about their motivations for doing so. We asked separately about correcting usages that might appear in students’ writing and those that might appear in students’ speech during class.

Analysis Methods

Our analysis consisted of descriptive statistics and statistical comparisons between groups. We examined distributions of answers for each question and then used cross tabs to explore the correlations between answers and the various categories of teachers, such as their teaching context, years of experience, and whether they had taken a linguistics class. To explore the statistical significance of differences between groups, we ran an analysis of variance using SPSS. For some items, such as whether taking a linguistics class was associated with a difference in teachers’ reported correction, we used t-tests to identify statistically significant differences in the mean scores between groups.

Because our sample was predominantly White and female, we did not have enough gender or racial variation in the sample to analyze responses based on gender or race. These are important categories to explore, and we note in advance that this is a stark limitation of the study. At the same time, the findings focused on differences between elementary and secondary teachers’ beliefs about language as well as the distribution of respondents across varied regions of the state provide details not previously documented in the literature.

Findings

Our primary finding is that there are significant differences in how elementary and secondary teachers report thinking about correcting language. The differences by grade level taught remain consistent across all other types of grouping that we analyzed. We also found that, in general, teachers report being more concerned about written language than about oral language. We found moderate differences between teachers in different regions of the state, which correlated with urban versus rural contexts. We also note differences in the responses of teachers who had and had not taken a linguistics class. We provide details of each of these findings below.
Correcting Writing Versus Correcting Speech

Overall, we found that teachers were more likely to correct writing than speech. When we combine the number of teachers who reported that they always or frequently correct student language use, we see that 56.4% of teachers reported correcting writing, whereas only 39.8% of teachers reported correcting speech.

When we separated the sample into elementary and secondary teachers, we found that secondary teachers accounted for the majority of this difference. Elementary teachers showed little variation between reported correction of writing and speech, with 48.2% reporting they always or frequently correct student writing and a slightly smaller 47.1% reporting they always or frequently correct student speech. Secondary teachers reported being much more likely to correct student writing compared to speech. We found that 70.6% of secondary teachers reported always or frequently correcting student writing, whereas only 27.1% of secondary teachers always or frequently correct student speech. Additional related survey results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of teachers reporting they correct students’ oral and written language by grade level taught

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All grades (PreK–12)</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary (PreK–5)</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (6–12)</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language Correction by Region of the State

We divided respondents into the region of the state where they taught as a way to create a proxy for urban and rural contexts. We used the nine regions developed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for its Regional Professional Development Centers. The regions of the state surrounding St. Louis and Kansas City contained the densest urban populations with the largest numbers of speakers of African American English and Chicano English and the largest numbers of English learners. Although the more rural areas of the state had large numbers of speakers of Ozark English and other southern varieties, there was less racial/ethnic linguistic variation.

We found that teachers in the more urban regions of the state were less likely to correct students’ written and oral language than teachers in more rural regions. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that there was a statistically significant difference between the
mean reported correction of written language by each of the nine regions of the state, 
F(8, 1542) = 4.136, p < .001, η² = .021. Data are presented as mean ± standard deviation. 
Tukey post hoc analysis showed that the differences between St. Louis (M = 2.54, SD = .737) and the more rural regions of the state, such as the Northeast region (decrease in M = 0.31, 95% CI [–0.61, –0.01], p = .033), drove much of that difference. The same statistically significant difference was found for the reported correction of speech, F(8, 1543) = 4.597, p < .001, η² = .023, with teachers in the more urban areas of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Columbia reporting lower frequency of correcting students’ speech than teachers in the more rural regions of the state. For example, the Tukey post hoc test showed a statistically significant difference between the St. Louis region and the Northwest region (decrease in M = .43, 95% CI [–0.80, –0.07], p = .007); however, there were no statistically significant differences between the more rural regions in the north or south of the state.

As with other aspects of correction, this difference was more pronounced with secondary teachers than with elementary teachers. For example, secondary teachers in the St. Louis area were least likely to report correcting students’ oral language, with only 15.3% of teachers reporting they always or frequently correct student speech. Teachers in the Kansas City area were the next least likely, with 21.2% of teachers reporting they always or frequently correct student speech. Teachers in the rural regions in the corners of the state reported being most likely to correct student speech, with 35.5%, 36.0%, and 42.2% of teachers in the Springfield, Kirksville, and Cape Girardeau regions respectively reporting that they always or frequently correct student speech. More complete details are shown in Table 2.

**Language Correction by Linguistics Class Completion**

One of the key questions we wanted to answer was whether taking a linguistics class makes a difference in how teachers think about correcting language. We hypothesized that teachers who had taken a linguistics class would be more knowledgeable about natural language variation and thus less concerned with prescriptive mandates to follow arbitrary conventions regarding language use. We hoped to find evidence of this pattern in our survey results.

We ran an independent samples t-test to compare the differences in reported correction of students’ written or oral language use for teachers who had or had not taken linguistics classes. For this analysis we looked at the average score of teachers’ reported correction of students’ written language or speech. Teachers scored their own frequency of correction on a scale from 1 (I never correct student writing [speech]) to 4 (I correct whenever I notice an error). The lowest possible mean score is 1, the highest is 4, and the midpoint is 2.5.

Across the full group of PreK–12 teachers, there was no statistically significant difference in the reported correction of writing, but there was a difference in the reported correction of speech. The mean for reported correction of speech was lower in teachers who had taken a linguistics class (2.40) compared with those who had not taken a linguistics class (2.56); t(1549) = –3.940, p < .001. This suggests that taking a linguistics class is associated with less correction of student speech.
When we split the survey responses into elementary and secondary teachers, the differences stood out more starkly. There was no significant difference in the correction of writing or speech for any of the elementary teachers based on whether they had taken a linguistics class. For secondary teachers there was a clear difference.

Table 2

PreK–12 teachers’ reported likeliness to correct students’ speech by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Early childhood and elementary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>PreK–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infrequently</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cape Girardeau</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Columbia</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kansas City</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Kirksville</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Maryville</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rolla</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Springfield</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. St. Louis</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Warrensburg</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The independent samples t-test showed statistically significant difference in reported correction of both student writing and speech between teachers who had taken a linguistics class and those who had not. Secondary teachers who had taken a linguistics class reported they were less likely to correct student writing (mean = 2.88) than teachers who had not taken a linguistics class (mean = 3.07), t(560) = –2.787, p = .005.

Similarly, secondary teachers who had taken a linguistics class reported they were less likely to correct student speech (mean = 2.20) than teachers who had not taken a linguistics class (mean = 2.35), t(560) = –2.291, p = .022. In both cases, the reported differences are not large, but they do suggest that for secondary teachers, taking a linguistics class is correlated with a less prescriptive approach to language correction.

In more general terms, of teachers who had taken a linguistics class, 67.5% reported they frequently or always correct student writing, whereas 77.2% of teachers
who had not taken a linguistics class reported that level of correction. Of the secondary teachers who had taken a linguistics class, only 24.6% said they frequently or always correct student speech, and 32.1% of teachers who did not take a linguistics class said they did. We explore some of the causes and implications for these differences in the discussion below.

Language Correction by Age and Years Teaching

Previous research on teachers’ language ideologies suggested that the longer teachers have been teaching the more they conform to prescriptive and hegemonic language ideologies (Metz, 2019). We explored teachers’ beliefs about correction in relation to both their age and their years teaching and found a small but significant correlation between both variables and the reported correction of students’ oral language use. We ran a Spearman’s rank-order correlation to determine the relationship between years teaching and reported correction of student errors in speech. For all teachers, Grades PreK–12, there was a statistically significant but weak positive correlation. \( r^s(1549) = .078, p < .05. \) We found the same significant but weak correlation between teachers’ age and their reported correction of student speech, \( r^s(1547) = .078, p < .05. \)

We split the teachers into elementary and secondary to see if the correlations were stronger in one group or the other. We found that the correlations for both age and years teaching and reported correction of student speech were weaker, although still significant, for elementary teachers. For secondary teachers, the correlation between years teaching and correction of student speech was no longer significant, although the correlation between age and correction of student speech was statistically significant and was slightly stronger, \( rs(558) = .109, p < .05. \)

There was no correlation between age or years teaching and the reported correction of errors in student writing for any group of teachers.

These findings add important nuance to earlier studies in that they confirm there are differences in teachers’ beliefs about language correlated with teachers’ age. Older teachers tend to have more prescriptive beliefs about language correction. Still, these findings suggest these correlations are weak and that other factors may be more important in determining when, why, and how teachers engage in correcting student language. These findings also highlight the difference between teachers’ attention to spoken and written language use, as correcting student speech is correlated with teachers’ age, but correcting student writing is not.

Motivation for Correction

To understand teachers’ motivations for correcting student language use, we asked teachers to rank seven potential factors that might influence their decision to correct student language. Separate questions focused on motivations for correcting writing and correcting speech. Respondents scored each potential motivation on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 4 (extremely important).
To assess overall motivations for correction, we compared the average score given by teachers and then disaggregated for elementary and secondary teachers.

We found that teachers shared two primary motivations for correcting student language in writing: (1) to help students be successful in school and (2) to help students be successful in life outside of school. The least influential motivations were (1) that administrators told teachers to correct student language and (2) that it helped establish teachers’ professional authority. The complete ranking and the means are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Teachers’ motivations to correct language in student writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Grades PreK–12, mean score</th>
<th>Grades P–6, mean score</th>
<th>Grades 6–12, mean score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It will help my students in life outside of school.</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It will help my students be successful in school.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is part of my job.</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>It is instinctive; I do it without thinking.</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>It prepares students for high-stakes tests.</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It helps establish my professional authority.</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>My administration tells me I have to.</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean score on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (extremely important); 2.5 midpoint.

Teachers’ motivations for correcting student speech were similar, although the correction of speech was less strongly motivated by helping students be successful in school (mean score 3.25 for writing and 3.09 for speech). This difference suggests that teachers viewed speech as less important for success in school, as compared with life outside of school, whereas they viewed writing as equally important both in and outside of school.

When we looked at differences in teachers’ motivations for correcting student language based on the grades they taught, we found a few key differences (see Table 4). The most significant difference was that Grade 6–12 teachers placed much greater importance on all motivations for correcting students’ written language than Grade PreK–5 teachers did. The mean difference for each motivation was almost half a point (0.5)
The data show a more complicated story for the motivations to correct student speech. In almost every case, elementary teachers reported a stronger influence of the motivations to correct speech than secondary teachers did. The differences were not as pronounced as they were for the motivations to correct writing, but the overall pattern shows that elementary teachers were more motivated to correct speech for multiple reasons. The one exception is that secondary teachers were slightly more motivated to correct speech as a means to establish their professional authority, but this remains a weak motivation for all teachers (mean = 1.42).

Table 4

Teachers’ motivations to correct language in student speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Grades PreK–12, mean score</th>
<th>Grades PreK–6, mean score</th>
<th>Grades 6–12, mean score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It will help my students in life outside of school.</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It will help my students be successful in school.</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is instinctive; I do it without thinking.</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>It is part of my job.</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>It prepares students for high stakes tests.</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It helps establish my professional authority.</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>My administration tells me I have to.</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean score on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (extremely important); 2.5 midpoint.

We compared differences in teachers’ motivations to correct student language depending on whether they had taken a linguistics class. Because we saw such stark differences in motivations between elementary and secondary teachers, we first ran this analysis while controlling for the grades taught.

A one-way MANCOVA showed that a statistically significant difference between teachers who had taken a linguistics class and those who had not in their motivations for correcting student language use after controlling for grades taught (F(14, 1524) = 1.921, p < .021, Wilks’ Λ = .983 partial η² = .017). Follow-up tests showed statistically signif-
significant differences in the adjusted means for relying on instinct as a motivation to correct both writing \( (F(1, 1537) = 4.302, p < .038, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003) \) and speech \( (F(1, 1537) = 12.915, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008) \); however, the effect sizes for these differences are so small that they don’t indicate much practical difference.

To explore differences between elementary and secondary teachers in motivations for correction based on taking a linguistics class, we ran an analysis after splitting the respondents by grade level taught. A one-way MANCOVA revealed no statistically significant differences for elementary teachers who had taken a linguistics class versus those who had not.

The one-way MANCOVA did show statistically significant differences for secondary teachers, \( F(14, 545) = 2.101, p < .011, \text{Wilks’ } \Lambda = .949 \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .051 \). In addition to reporting less reliance on instinct to correct student written and spoken language, teachers who had taken a linguistics class reported less influence from feeling that correcting speech was their job or that correcting student speech would help students inside or outside of school. We explore implications of these findings in the discussion below.

**Discussion**

This study sought to answer the question: How do teachers across different grades and contexts think about the correction of student language use? Our analysis focused on teachers’ responses to the key questions “Do you correct errors in students’ writing?” and “Do you correct errors in students’ speech?” as well as teachers’ motivations for correction. Below we discuss the key findings related to (1) differences in elementary and secondary teachers’ beliefs about language teaching, (2) the impact of linguistics classes, (3) small differences between rural and urban contexts, and (4) differences in the correction of writing and speech.

**Elementary Versus Secondary Teachers**

The starkest finding across all our analyses was the difference between reported error correction by elementary versus secondary teachers. Here we examine a few aspects of these findings.

First, secondary teachers were much more likely to report correcting errors in student writing than elementary teachers. Because the elementary sample included preschool and early elementary teachers, this may be a result of teachers in those grades encouraging invented spelling and other early forms of writing alongside a philosophy that accepts all student writing as a valuable stage in early literacy. However, beside a greater acceptance of nonstandard forms of writing in early literacy classrooms we see a preponderance of secondary teachers (70.6%) reporting that they *frequently* or *always* correct student writing. This vigilance to error correction in secondary writing has been documented repeatedly in the literature (Shaughnessy, 1979; Smith & Wilhelm, 2007).

This difference between elementary and secondary teachers shows up in the correction of speech as well. In the case of speech, secondary teachers were less likely to...
correct students’ language use than elementary teachers. Here the acceptance of nonstandard forms of early literacy does not apply. There is evidence that teachers and caregivers correct the oral language of young children in an effort to get them to align more closely with the dominant version of Standard English expected in schools (Whittingham et al., 2018). In addition, there is evidence that students raised with African American English show a decreasing use of those features through fourth grade, which might be a result of this attention to correcting speech in the early grades (Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010). Van Hofwegen and Wolfram (2010) also documented that students show an increasing usage of African American English in Grades 6–10. There may be a confluence of factors at play, with students being more likely to assert their identity through language use and teachers being less interested in correcting student language as students enter the middle and secondary grades.

Overall, although elementary teachers maintained a balanced correction of writing and speech, by secondary school this skewed strongly toward heightened correction of writing and relaxed correction of student speech.

**The Impact of Linguistics Classes**

Another place where the differences between elementary and secondary teachers’ correction of language stood out related to the impact of taking a linguistics class. There was no statistically significant difference in the reported correction of writing or speech for elementary teachers based on whether they had taken a linguistics class, but there was a difference for secondary teachers.

One explanation of this difference may be that elementary and secondary teachers take different kinds of linguistics classes. In Missouri, all middle and high school English teachers must take 6 credit hours of linguistics, described in the state law as “study of the English Language (to include modern grammar, history of the language, and/or dialects)” (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). At the early childhood and elementary level, there is no linguistics requirement connected to certification, and any linguistics that teachers take is focused on language acquisition, phonics, and vocabulary. The lack of a linguistics course connected to the history of English or social dialects of English leaves elementary teachers without exposure to key ideas about English language variation.

The correlation between taking linguistics classes and secondary teachers’ approach to correction is small but significant. More study could help determine the extent to which the content of linguistics classes leads teachers to do less prescriptive correction of student language use in both writing and speech.

**Rural Versus Urban Contexts**

The analysis of survey responses by regions of the state provided a proxy for urban and rural contexts. The majority of Missouri consists of small towns and rural areas, with the key exceptions of St. Louis and Kansas City. In addition, the region with Columbia and Jefferson City has many characteristics of what Milner (2012) would label an urban emergent context. These three regions showed statistically significant differenc-
es in teachers’ reported correction of student language use compared to the other more rural regions of the state.

Although we don’t have clear evidence of causation for these differences, one hypothesis is that in urban contexts with greater linguistic diversity more attention is paid to how teachers deal with that diversity. The majority of literature on dialects in school focuses on urban contexts and students of color who speak historically stigmatized varieties of English. Key texts focus on addressing language variation as a function of racial or ethnic group identity (Baker-Bell, 2020b; Reaser et al., 2017; Rosa, 2019). An optimistic hypothesis is that the attention to linguistic variation for students in urban contexts is starting to take hold, at least to a greater extent than in rural schools. At the same time the lack of literature for teachers in rural contexts to address language variation in their schools may be a growing problem as students in those schools maintain the prescriptive view of English (Curzan, 2014) and bring an associated standard language ideology to the college classroom (Lawton & de Kleine, 2020).

**Implications**

Despite an abundance of teacher-centered literature questioning the value of error correction in schools from preschool through secondary school (e.g., Christensen, 2003; Marshall, 2018; Whittingham et al., 2018), teachers continue to rely on correction of language use errors in writing and speech. As a growing body of research shows the value of attending to the rich linguistic diversity students bring to school, there is a burgeoning need to provide professional development to teachers so that they can sustain and develop students’ linguistic repertoires rather than correcting students’ language use.

As teacher educators consider how to help teachers take up critical approaches to teaching about language use, based in a linguistically informed approach, they will do well to attend to the different needs of teachers across grade levels and teaching contexts. This study has shown clearly that teachers in the secondary grades hold vastly different beliefs about language correction than teachers in the elementary grades. It also provides evidence suggesting that linguistics classes make a difference in reducing teachers’ tendency toward prescriptive correction in writing and speech.

Although small, in-depth qualitative studies provide invaluable information about classroom interactions that support or hinder student learning through language ideological approaches, those studies are complemented by wide-angle studies that provide an overview of the teaching landscape. At the same time, wide-angle studies of this type are limited in their ability to speak to the specifics of individual cases; we don’t know the details of how individual teachers thought about correction. However, when wide-angle studies are viewed in conversation with qualitative studies of specific teachers (e.g., Martinez, 2017; Metz, 2022; Metz & Knight, 2021), a more complete picture can emerge.

Future studies of this kind would benefit from the intentional recruitment of participants from varied racial and gender backgrounds to add that element to understanding how teachers and contexts interact with approaches to teaching about language.
About the Authors

Mike Metz is an associate professor of English education, and the Director of Teacher Education at the University of Missouri. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in language and literacy education. Mike’s research, published across the fields of English education, linguistics, and teacher education, examines teaching practices that promote critical language awareness in secondary schools.

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References


