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Gatekeepers and Teachers: Preparing Writing Teachers to Negotiate Standard Language Ideology

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Writing teacher educators and educational linguists have grappled for some time with how to help teachers engage productively with language in classroom teaching, particularly as many teachers work with increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. This article shares results from a study of pre-service English teachers who has implications for how writing teacher education may benefit from a more explicit focus on language, specifically standard language ideology. My hope is that this piece sheds further light on the implications of the side comments I’ve heard from pre-service teachers who encounter their first placements in diverse schools. My concern is that sometimes these well-meaning new teachers enter schools and correct their bi-dialectal students’ oral or written language on the first day of class in their fervor to take on the role of “English” teacher. These new teachers express shock that students find their corrections to be offensive at worst, mystifying at best.

And while some novice and experienced English teachers take part in conversations about respecting student language and working with English language learners, these discussions raise questions of how to incorporate linguistic understandings into classroom practice, particularly writing instruction. Every year at NCTE’s Annual Conference, I listen to educators and linguists discuss what teachers need to know about language (i.e., see NCTE Commission on Language, 2008), and the conversations often lead back to providing equitable, effective writing instruction for a range of students.

During the discussions, questions often are raised that reflect the existing gaps between linguistic scholarship and everyday practice: Do writing teachers already know linguistics on some intuitive level? What are the ideological implications of particular language about language or particular writing activities? How can writing teachers enact understandings of “Standard English,” “academic English,” and “formal English” within a frame of respecting student language?

This is part of the ways that concepts like standards, correctness, standard English, and language appreciation matter for pre-service teachers, and how it may be crucial for us to understand how they struggle with these concepts in relation to writing instruction. As they enter the field, pre-service English teachers are positioned to be language authorities and often express anxieties and uncertainties about how to fulfill that role in relation to the teaching of writing. The traditional position of writing teachers as standard bearers, or “gatekeepers,” creates potential conflicting ideologies for pre-service teachers who are also taught about language variety and culturally relevant pedagogy during teacher education. These future teachers of writing, in many ways invested instruction.

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This article focuses on interviews with seven undergraduate pre-service secondary English teachers during their initial semesters of teacher education. The interviews revealed standard language ideology, or ideologies about standard English and correctness. Close analysis of the pre-service teachers’ language moves revealed ideological stances that are interlinked with their understandings of English teacher authority and beliefs about providing access for students. The study showed that understandings of language use, particularly traditional views of grammar, are often disconnected from understandings about how language works within classroom interactions or in writing instruction. Furthermore, the subject position of English teachers as standard-bearing language authority prevents some pre-service teachers from taking up new understandings that promote student learning.

Even teachers who espouse language appreciation may lack strategies or re-interpret strategies through pre-existing filters. For instance, the study shows how pre-service teachers’ comments often rely on a commonsense belief about language acquisition 1. The population of teachers has become increasingly white, monolingual, female and middle class, and these teachers will teach an increasingly linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse group of students (see Melnick and Zeichner, 1998; Hollins and Guzman, 2006).

2. Even the language about language carries ideological implications. For instance, composition scholar Bethany Davis (2012) points to the unmarked privilege associated to “student” teacher authority. 3. The standardization of language is a process during which aspects of language use become selected, accepted, diffused geographically, maintained, and elaborated upon; they acquire prestige and are prescribed, codified, and maintained (Milroy and Milroy, 1991). English teachers have been placed traditionally in the role of codifiers.

4. I define stance as “methods, linguistic and other, by which interactants create and signal relationships with the propositions they give voice to and the people they interact with” (Johnstone, 2007, 137).

5. The traditional model of “grammar” in English language arts defines grammar as a distinct set of prescriptive rules to be learned.

6. This refers to referring to perceptions about language that perpetuate inequality by marginalizing non-dominant groups and promoting a dominant group’s interests (Lappé, Green, 1997) and as a more neutral belief system that can function normatively: an “unlearning, communal belief system about the way the language is used and is supposed to be” (Weilfrim, 1996, 109). In both neutral and critical views, language ideology can apply to unquestioned beliefs about an assumed, monolingual standard or beliefs about the relationships between written and oral language.

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This study points to the ways that standard language ideology can blur oral and written language distinctions, stymieing even experienced teachers of writing who mean to be equitable.

I extend this work into the domain of undergraduate pre-service teacher education. Not only do pre-service English teachers have to grapple with beliefs from their K-12 learning, but they also have to consider new understandings from coursework compared to those in student teaching and other field placements. Pre-service teachers’ understandings of writing instruction further interact with multiple contexts that can influence their language beliefs. As we know, field experiences can be a powerful source for understanding new concepts and ideas; knowledge learned in methods courses can conflict with field experiences, sending competing messages (see Cliff and Brady, 2006). Research also shows that school policy can influence language attitudes more than certain kinds of coursework (Blake and Cutler, 2003). Furthermore, national and local standards expectations provide contexts for teacher beliefs. As Amy Carpenter Ford and Tracy Davis (2012) point to in “Integrating Standards: Considerations for Language and Writing,” the common Core State Standards (CCSS) ask teachers to acknowledge language variation in standard English in the writing and speaking of others and themselves. Although this inclusion offers an entry point for attending to language variation in the classroom, the phrase “standard English” also reifies a monolithic standard.

Study Design and Findings

Interviewees were members of a second-year English undergraduate cohort and were in their first two semesters of teacher education at a large Midwestern university at the time of the interviews. The cohort included ten members of which four female participants (Kate, Amy, Susan, Mary) and three male participants (Dan, Matt, Zack) participated in the study. All participants identify as native English speakers and as white, lower to upper middle class. Interview questions focused on how the pre-service teachers thought about language in the English language arts classroom, including standard English, stigmatized language varieties, and linguistic diversity. Participants also described their views of successful English teachers and the types of schools where they hope to work in the future. In most cases, the pre-service teacher had taken comparable coursework in English language before entering teacher education. Although participants, however, they filtered understandings from these courses through their existing experiences with and beliefs about language and English teaching.

I analyzed the interviews with the following question: What ideological stances (about teaching English, standard English, and “correctness”) are reflected in the language moves of pre-service English teachers? In addition to the patterns of subject positions (see Appendix One) certain patterns emerged in relation to the pre-service teachers’ multiple subject positions. First, while most participants talked about appreciating language variety or creativity in some way, there also was a range of ways in which participants positioned themselves as gatekeepers and users of “nonstandard” English or other languages as a problem or limiting factor. Second, in contrast to a desire to support student access to language, conflation of oral and written language practices was common, especially as participants imagined approaches to teaching methods.

The sections that follow focus on the ways that standard language ideology manifested as participants explored multiple, often conflicting positions related to providing access, engaging with language authority, and expressing language appreciation. I provide an in-depth look at specific new teachers’ language moves in order to help us better understand the ways that language beliefs, such as those supported by standard language ideology, might filter pre-service teachers’ take up of linguistically-informed writing methods.

Gatekeeper and access provider?: Dilemmas of leveling the playing field

In all of the interviews, participants discussed the importance of providing students with access to standard English, yet dilemmas emerge in their descriptions of approaches to providing this access. The common shock of dealing with their first sets of student papers showcases the familiar thread in writing methods of helping new writing teachers manage their reactions and pre-existing beliefs about “good” writing.

Excerpt One:

Amy describes how it is important for English teachers to address “grammar” in order to level the playing field for students (see transcript conventions in Appendix Two):

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“Gatekeeper and access provider?: Dilemmas of leveling the playing field”

Relying on common understandings of standard language, Amy’s language moves express her belief that “proper words” take on “the” unified form dictated by standardized tests and that students can learn this first through spoken English. Amy is unaware that the spoken standard shifts more than the written version advocated by standardized tests and style manuals; there are important distinctions between written and spoken standard English (Cheshire, 1999). In lines 1 and 2, standard language ideology emerges in the belief that changing speech equals changing writing. This equates spoken and written language acquisition. However, her response is unsurprising due to the pervasiveness of a commonsense belief in standard language ideology—a belief that a single “correct” form of spoken English exists and is based on a one “correct” form of written English (Milroy, 1995).

Similarly, Matt reverts to an oral correction model of parroting back student language in standard English, a strategy that reveals similar ideologies about oral transfer of language: “I don’t think I would ever chastise somebody for not using standard English”…“I can say, ‘Right so what you’re saying is?’ and repeat it in standard English?” Other studies have revealed that this strategy undermines effective classroom interactions and does not contribute to learning (see Godley et al.). This view of oral language ignores how the constant creativity of communication means that “absolute standardisation of a spoken language is never achieved” (Milroy and Milroy 22). Yet, when Amy uses “it” in lines 1 and 6, she implies a belief in a standard as one unified “proper” form to be learned. This belief is confirmed with “the right idea” in line 6, which echoes Amy’s earlier desire to make sure all students know “the” grammar rules so that the playing field is level for all students.

Amy grapples with the dilemma of providing access to the “right idea” of standard language or “proper words” and yet not asking students to change their home languages. Amy doesn’t want to change who “students” are and sees her role as encouraging students to learn English for the standardized test context. Amy takes on a subject position of English teacher as someone who provides “access” and “makes sure” all students (“everyone”) use proper English with the “right idea.” However, this idea of access rubs against Amy’s sense of herself as a gatekeeper, creating a dilemma that she attempts to mediate. Amy uses a laughing tone to mediate her statements of authority. She tries to express openness to home language as she says, “This is just for English language learning” (lines 9-10), while still partitioning it outside of the school context.

Rosina Lippi-Green’s (1997) discussion of “appropriacy” arguments in English with an Accent points to the dilemmatic nature of
of this position: “the message remains the same, and typically schizophrenic: appreciate and respect the languages of peripheral communities, but keep them in their place” (109). In fact, “you can’t talk like them,” and “like is not an acceptable goal for a writer.” For example, Mary did not express the same anxiety as Kate; she took the same course but described her plans to use the book as a resource rather than feeling like she needed to internalize a right answer. Similarly, Susan rejected the view of a single “right” answer; she describes herself guiding students through multiple varieties and even redefining what is “correct” while providing access to standard English. Positioning herself as a teacher who is a guide to language variation and who is “considered right” by her institution allows her own language learning experiences and discussions of power during coursework to frame her future teaching approach.

Beyond zero tolerance: The dilemmas of language authority and deficit thinking

In composition studies, the emphasis on students’ right to their own language points to a consensus that zero tolerance for language variation may change ingrained attitudes like “zero tolerance” in response to stigmatized language varieties, my interviews complicate this as a sufficient goal for writing teacher education. Myths pervasive amongst teachers in Ball and Muhammad’s teacher education course mirror those of most of my interviewees: 1) “there is a uniform standard English that has been reduced to a set of consistent rules,” 2) “that these ‘correct’ consistent rules should be followed by all American English speakers,” and 3) “this mythical standard English must be safeguarded by everyone connected with its use, particularly classroom teachers” (Ball and Muhammad 77).

Unpacking such myths requires engaging with less obvious intolerance and unexamined language understandings. Research shows that unchallenged myths about language deficiency—and assumptions about what students can and cannot do based on those myths—can influence teachers who will teach in high-need areas but have little experience in those communities (Bauer and Trudgill, 1998; Valencia and Solórzano, 2004). Myths of verbal deprivation have historically led to attempts to fix students’ “deficits” rather than to recognize the systematicity of stigmatized varieties of English (Labov, 1967). As a case in point, Kate’s stances in her interview reveal the ways that standard language ideology intersects with anxieties about fulfilling the subject position of a language authority, or writing instructor who knows all rules needed to correct student writing.

Kate’s language moves in the interviews trouble the idea that moving teachers beyond a zero tolerance approach means that deficit thinking has disappeared or that their teaching approaches reflect new philosophies of language appreciation. While teacher educators Arnetha Ball and Rashidah Muhammad (2003) conclude that coursework in language variation might change ingrained attitudes like “zero tolerance” in response to stigmatized language varieties, my interviews complicate this as a sufficient goal for writing teacher education. Myths pervasive amongst teachers in Ball and Muhammad’s teacher education course mirror those of most of my interviewees: 1) “there is a uniform standard English that has been reduced to a set of consistent rules,” 2) “that these ‘correct’ consistent rules should be followed by all American English speakers,” and 3) “this mythical standard English must be safeguarded by everyone connected with its use, particularly classroom teachers” (Ball and Muhammad 77). Unpacking such myths requires engaging with less obvious intolerance and unexamined language understandings. Research shows that unchallenged myths about language deficiency—and assumptions about what students can and cannot do based on those myths—can influence teachers who will teach in high-need areas but have little experience in those communities (Bauer and Trudgill, 1998; Valencia and Solórzano, 2004). Myths of verbal deprivation have historically led to attempts to fix students’ “deficits” rather than to recognize the systematicity of stigmatized varieties of English (Labov, 1967). As a case in point, Kate’s stances in her interview reveal the ways that standard language ideology intersects with anxieties about fulfilling the subject position of a language authority, or writing instructor who knows all rules needed to correct student writing.
This later study further affirmed the ways that positions taken up by English teachers have implications for equitable instruction: Multiple positive positions English as his perspective; “way I would teach.” This may be partly due to his sense of expertise with standard English, as he claims standard can be used to spark conversation about the ideologies related to specific writing methods used to teach academic and varieties while rejecting authoritative or language maven positions (McBee Orzulak, 2012). A text like David Brown's (2009) educators might provide resources or models of experienced teachers who work with student language, supporting access to new uses and varieties in their particular classroom.

Similarly, Matt expresses appreciation for language varieties, but he plans to only “actively” teach standard English and provide access to a “preferred type of English.” Yet, he imagines “styleshifting” with students, including using “AAVE” if he encounters speakers in his classroom. Matt’s confidence in his ability to shift readily into African American English may reveal that he does not see AAE as a code that requires systemic learning. This stance also ignores the social implications connected to using language varieties.

According to Irvine and Gal (2000), stances like Matt and Zack’s may function as erasure of specific linguistic codes by assuming that ability to command those varieties could be intuited or appropriated easily rather requiring teachers to learn rule governed systems or consult linguistic resources. We can see how dilemmas emerge for these pre-service teachers who pay lip service to language appreciation, yet whose imagined approaches as writing teachers may reveal limiting standard language ideology.

Implications: Engaging Pre-service Writing Teachers with Standard Language Ideology

Implications include the need for writing teachers education on the relationship between ideologies and enactment of specific methods. The study suggests that attention to the subject positions of writing teachers might help pre-service teachers think through dilemmas they may face in the complex intersections between non-dominant discourses around language in schools and writing instruction. Standard language ideology provides a lens for naming common dilemmas or aspects of the dilemma.

As Leah Zuiderma (2011) discusses in “Contentious Conversations,” part of being an English teacher historically has included engaging with dilemmas and debates, specifically ongoing debates about grammar and writing approaches. The importance of engaging in these conversations persists, as ignoring standard language ideology can mean that new teachers succumb to inequitable methods to provide their “own truths” about language and writing instruction that they may find more palatable and “correctness” and language variety could provide new teachers with choices for responding to issues of language authority and teaching their students how to negotiate shifting understandings of standard English. Conversely, a lack of awareness of how language works in relation to circulating ideologies could limit their responses due to adherence to traditional approaches or common sense beliefs.

In particular, I suggest that future writing teachers need to critique traditional, monolithic understandings of standard English even as they learn to understand language patterns in student writing. In writing methods courses, models of experienced teachers might demonstrate possibilities for teachers of writing to work alongside students in inquiry-based learning about language while admitting the possibility for not knowing every grammatical term in order to be a “good” teacher of writing. Writing teacher educators might provide resources or models of experienced teachers who work with student language, supporting access to new uses and varieties while rejecting authoritative or language maven positions (McBee Orzulak, 2012). A text like David Brown’s (2009) In Other Words can be used to spark conversation about the ideologies related to specific writing methods used to teach academic writing. Or, articles like “Analyzing the Writing of English Language Learners” by Mary Schleppegrell and Ann Go (2007) can be used to help new teachers analyze what English language learners are able to do grammatically in their writing. As an activity like this one can help new writing teachers note the ideologies inherent in their initial deficit reactions to a non-native English writer’s text (i.e. correcting all errors based on their native intuition) versus using a student's text in order to learn more about its linguistic patterns. The goal is to help future teachers language moves in the study may help us consider ways to engage and manage the ideological, dilemmic nature of language understandings in writing instruction. Their interviews raise questions for writing teacher education and research: Which stances might help pre-service teachers understand how language works contextually and interactively in writing classroom settings? How might writing methods curricula help pre-service teachers engage critically with standardized testing and implicit language beliefs in ways that help them to be agentive in a variety of contexts? What is the best means for engaging pre-service teachers with critical language understandings, particularly how to deal with the dilemmas they face as they simultaneously seek to respect student language and provide access to standard English? Whatever the answers, the study suggests that we need to move beyond simply fostering language appreciation or preventing a zero tolerance approach; instead we should move towards promoting sustainable positions for equitable writing instruction.

Works Cited


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