

Supporting Students' Own Languages in the Writing Classroom: Adaptable Writing Assignments for Enacting Linguistic Justice in Local Contexts

Keli Tucker, Kelsey Hawkins, Sasha Poma Mansure, and Sophia Minnillo

Introduction

In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English endorsed linguistic diversity in writing classrooms by adopting the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution, which affirmed students' right to use "the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, [and] the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity." While this resolution prompted a shift toward greater recognition and support of students' diverse linguistic practices, many individual instructors still struggle to ensure students' right to their own ways of languaging in practice (Perryman-Clark et al., 2014; Thompson & Hatch Pokhrel, 2025; Young, 2021). As current or recently former graduate students ourselves, we know that the task of ensuring students' right to engage in their own authentic linguistic practices can prove particularly difficult for graduate student instructors, as we are often not provided with the resources and support needed to transfer our newfound theoretical knowledge about linguistic justice into pedagogical praxis.

In this symposium piece, we share assignments we designed to offer students avenues for engaging their full linguistic repertoires in our courses, as well as to enact linguistic justice as writing instructors, which we define as implementing a form of antiracist and socially just pedagogy in which we recognize the value of students' diverse languaging practices and work against histories of linguistic discrimination. We will reference these assignments, found in the Appendix, throughout the piece.

This article includes pedagogical reflections from our years of prioritizing linguistic justice as graduate instructors, as well as our discussions about enacting linguistic justice in our local contexts and co-constructing an interpretation of the affordances those pedagogical practices offer, a project that began during a series of online meetings organized by Keli Tucker in 2024. In sharing our pedagogical insights here, we hope to not only ease the labor of other graduate student instructors who need additional support in teaching toward linguistic justice by sharing resources and ideas they might adapt to their local contexts but also inspire them to more meaningfully engage with equitable and inclusive pedagogies within their writing classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

To provide background for the goals and learning outcomes of the assignments we discuss in this piece, we want to first offer both a brief overview of the theoretical grounding of our assignments, as well as resources readers can consult to apply these concepts in their own teaching contexts.

To support our students' linguistic practices, our assignments are rooted in **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP)**, a theoretical framework originating from Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. As an antiracist framework, CSP draws explicit attention to the problem of hegemonic gazes—particularly the white gaze—in instruction, and asks what “liberating ourselves from this gaze and the educational expectations it forwards [would] mean for our abilities to envision new forms of teaching and learning” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86). Rather than requiring students with minoritized racial and linguistic identities to perform white, middle-class norms, CSP guides instructors to sustain the heritage and contemporary languaging practices of racially and linguistically minoritized students. In this way, our assignments allow us to move beyond simply accepting and including non-standard ways of languaging in the classroom and toward centering students' linguistic resources as strengths (Paris, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2014).

We also grounded our assignments in other theoretical frameworks that support and work toward equity and inclusion in the teaching of writing. Sophia's assignment takes up the idea of **translanguaging**, an approach to writing and composition pedagogy originating in the linguistic practice of code-meshing, or the deployment of the full range of one's linguistic repertoire (Lewis et al., 2012). Multilingual students frequently practice translanguaging in their communities, but these language practices are less often valued in the classroom. Assignments that utilize translanguaging emphasize that students' wide range of linguistic variety is not a “barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but...a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (Horner et al., 2011, p. 303). Such assignments also help students practice composing across a range of rhetorical contexts.

Kelsey's, Keli's, and Sophia's assignments are designed to help students build their **Critical Language Awareness (CLA)** by supporting them in uncovering the invisible ways that language can “be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations... [or] to resist, redefine, and possibly reverse those relations” (Alim, 2005, p. 28). Writing studies conceptualizes CLA as a pedagogical framework with practical applications for teaching toward linguistic social justice, one that moves beyond simply affirming the value of linguistic diversity by also actively working to increase students' critical consciousness and rhetorical agency (Shapiro, 2022). Through CLA pedagogy, students develop the metalinguistic and rhetorical awareness to make effective choices in their writing. They also develop the agency to perform their right to their own language in academic settings, equipped with knowledge of the historical, political, and

sociocultural factors influencing the choices they make and the consequences of those choices (Shapiro et al., 2016).

Through our assignments, such as Keli's Language and Literacy Narrative, we also hope to increase students' awareness of **standard language ideologies**. In particular, we guide them toward understanding how standard language ideologies impact our perceptions of whose languaging practices hold power by constructing certain linguistic performances as more professional, appropriate, or correct. Moreover, we want students to understand that a person's languaging practices and the ways that person is racialized are connected as a result of **raciolinguistic ideologies** (Flores & Rosa, 2015) that have positioned standardized forms of English derived from white-centric expectations as normative in formal writing contexts.

Finally, Sasha's, Kelsey's, and Keli's assignments ask students to narrate, research, and/or analyze the writing and languaging practices circulating in their local contexts, or those that students themselves use in their communities. These assignments support students in understanding the value inherent in **community literacy practices**, which emphasize the variety of social, cultural, and political contexts in which literacy is used and shared. They also recognize that different communities have unique ways of engaging with language and literacy based on their histories, values, and needs (Brandt, 2001; Flower, 2008). Our assignments further push back on traditional frameworks of cultural capital—which have historically been used to rationalize the lower social and academic outcomes of racialized people by claiming that only access to the linguistic and epistemic capital of the white middle and upper classes will result in success—by utilizing community cultural capital frameworks (Yosso, 2005) to prompt students to draw on unacknowledged or undervalued cultural capital forms.

Instructional Context and Assignment Descriptions

To contextualize our pedagogical reflection, here we offer a brief overview of each author's instructional context at the time of writing and their assignment or activity (for full assignment guidelines, see Appendix).

Keli designed her Language and Literacy Narrative assignment at a midwestern PWI (Primarily White Institution). The assignment prompts students to reflect on their experiences as writers while thinking critically about how their linguistic histories have shaped their literate practices. The assignment also provides students with the opportunity to employ their own ways of languaging as they reflect on their linguistic backgrounds and writerly voices. While this assignment was initially developed in the context of a tutor education course to prepare peer writing tutors, it could also be implemented in first-year or intermediate writing courses or in courses with an explicit focus on language practices or community writing.

Kelsey teaches first-year writing at a midwestern PWI. Her Linguistic Observation and Analysis project tasks students with examining the relationship between language and

power within the communities to which they belong. This assignment, adapted from Wardle and Downs' *Writing About Writing*, 4th edition, requires students to first perform observations of two communities that they are a part of, then use the data they obtained from their observations to examine how different language practices exercise authority in various communities.

Sasha designed her Community Influencer Profile essay for first-year composition classes at a Western PWI. The assignment encourages students to think about how language helps members of a community influence others and how language impacts their own goals. Students begin by interviewing a member of a different linguistic community to explore how people with influence think of and use language to impact others, and then compose a profile essay sharing their findings.

Sophia teaches at a Western Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander-serving institution. She has created a Language Diversity Reflection activity that she assigns in her first-year and developmental writing classes. The activity, which includes reflective freewriting, allows students to experiment with translanguaging in a low-stakes context and apply their developing CLA creatively and personally.

Assignment Goals and Learning Outcomes

While each author designed their respective assignment with particular learning outcomes in mind, they are all designed to forward linguistic justice by providing students with opportunities to foster CLA, interrogate standard language ideologies, and celebrate their diverse language practices. Below, we articulate the primary goals of our assignments and how we work to meet those goals.

Fostering Critical Reflection

Some of our assignments prompt students to engage in critical self-reflection by encouraging them to examine their own languaging practices and challenge their preexisting assumptions about language. For Keli's Language and Literacy Narrative, students reflect on their diverse linguistic backgrounds by narrating a meaningful literacy experience shaped by their language history. Similarly, Sophia utilizes reflective freewriting to help students consider the value of linguistic diversity and examine their own language choices. By asking students to examine the identities, life experiences, and linguistic histories that inform their writerly voice, we aim to help students develop a sensitivity towards the complex relationships between racial, linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, regional, and other backgrounds. In doing so, students who embody dominant racial and linguistic norms might better understand their raciolinguistic privilege, and linguistically minoritized students might better recognize the legitimacy of the linguistic resources they bring to academic communities.

In addition to reflecting on their own linguistic histories, our assignments ask students to further reflect on their attitudes toward others' languaging practices. Class discussions

leading up to Kelsey’s Linguistic Observation and Analysis prompt students to reflect on the communities they are a part of, the languages they use, the experiences they have in gaining authority in or being excluded from specific linguistic communities, and the linguistic resources they bring to new contexts. Sasha’s Community Influencer Profile assignment encourages students to think about how language allows people to impact others. In asking students to consider the diverse linguistic practices circulating in the communities around them, we intend for them to develop a more critical perspective on the ideologies that shape their perceptions of their own and others’ languaging practices.

Deconstructing Language Ideologies

Our assignments also encourage students to deconstruct the standard language ideologies they may have internalized. Keli’s Language and Literacy Narrative assignment, which was developed in the context of shaping peer writing tutors’ approaches to tutoring and implemented in a classroom composed mainly of racially and linguistically privileged students, is intended to help students with raciolinguistic privilege reflect on how writing—even writing that is considered normative—is shaped by the writer’s linguistic histories. This reflection allows peer writing tutors to develop a stronger understanding of and empathy for students whose ways of languaging are often minoritized in academic spaces. Similarly, Sophia’s reflective activity encourages students to dismantle assumptions of linguistic homogeneity to avoid reifying standard language ideologies when revising their own writing or giving feedback to their peers.

Kelsey’s Linguistic Observation and Analysis assignment encourages students to interrogate standard language ideologies by examining the relationship between language and power in different communities and exploring how a variety of languages have authority across contexts. The assignment’s goal is for students to observe their communities, leading them to notice the ways they employ language in different contexts and the material effects of linguistic injustice for those excluded from particular communities. By thinking critically about the legitimacy of “standard” English and considering how language, community, and power intersect, students might begin deconstructing the standard language ideologies many of them have internalized.

Offering Space for Authentic Languaging Practices

Importantly, each of our assignments provides space for students to celebrate the entirety of their linguistic repertoires. By supporting students in embracing the richness of their languaging practices, we hope they will see those languaging practices as assets in academic spaces. Sophia’s reflective freewriting activity encourages students to use their entire communicative repertoire, including languages, dialects, registers, and visual semiotics. The research that students perform for Kelsey’s assignment provides them with an opportunity to identify and legitimize the language practices of communities to which they already belong. Sasha’s Community Influencer Profile achieves a similar goal, emphasizing the importance of using quotes from their research

in their original format to maintain the research participant's authentic voice. Finally, the assignment guidelines for Keli's assignment encourage students to use their own ways of languaging in their work. Through offering these opportunities for students to employ their full range of linguistic practices—and by providing encouraging formative feedback and utilizing more inclusive forms of assessment, such as grading contracts that measure students' labor, effort, and engagement rather than their ability to adhere to conventional forms of languaging—we create the space for students to use language authentically and celebrate their full linguistic identities in their work.

Building Rhetorical Flexibility

Lastly, our assignments are intended to not only increase students' critical awareness of their linguistic repertoires, but also, in some cases, to imagine how they might utilize their developing CLA in future contexts and communities. One aim of Kelsey's Linguistic Observation and Analysis project is to move students towards competently and confidently navigating new (especially academic) discourse communities through CLA. Through encouraging students to use their entire linguistic repertoires in a low-stakes activity, Sophia's assignment is also intended to reverse the effect of standard language ideologies that may have silenced students' ways of languaging in other contexts. By supporting students in building their rhetorical flexibility through legitimizing their full range of linguistic resources, we hope they can more fully embrace language diversity in their own and others' writing in the future.

Reflections on Implementing Our Assignments

In this section, we share insights into the key approaches that help us feel more confident in actively supporting our students' languaging and discussing linguistic justice in our classrooms.

At the same time, we want to acknowledge the often-complex dimensions of enacting linguistic justice through our teaching, and the increasingly daunting task of doing so in the current political landscape. In the classroom itself, we have sometimes struggled to keep students—especially white students, whose standard English practices are often powerfully rewarded by mainstream academia—interested in lessons and assignments related to linguistic diversity and inclusion. We have also experienced pushback from colleagues who feel our efforts hold little relevance to students. Moreover, recent legislation restricting discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses has instilled fear in many writing instructors about potential retribution for prioritizing linguistic diversity. Our positionality as graduate instructors—and our limited job security and power within our departments and institutions—can make teaching topics that our university community considers controversial feel even more precarious.

However, we believe that supporting our students' languaging has become more necessary than ever as our classrooms diversify and dominant political rhetoric becomes increasingly hostile toward people with minoritized identities, and we will

continue applying pedagogical practices grounded in the literature, our teaching experiences, and our core values because we know they help our students learn and feel welcome in our classrooms. Thus, in sharing our instructional experiences below, we have identified strategies that help us continue to successfully implement linguistic justice pedagogy despite these challenges.

Introducing Linguistic Justice

First, to ensure that students feel equipped to fulfill assignment expectations, we introduce linguistic justice concepts by fostering our students' CLA as well as their knowledge of code-meshing and translanguaging. When Kelsey assigns her Linguistic Observation and Analysis, she asks students to read and discuss articles pertaining to standard language ideology, monolingualism, and language difference (Bailey et al., 2023; Sánchez-Martín, 2021) before investigating how language, power, and community intersect in their observations. To prepare students for composing their Language and Literacy Narrative, Keli assigns Alvarez, Wan, and Lee's (2021) "Workin' Languages: Who We Are Matters in Our Writing" to introduce students to concepts of standard language ideology, raciolinguistic ideologies, linguistic diversity, and translanguaging. Laying this theoretical groundwork can provide students with the framework to understand how language shapes—and is shaped by—identity, power, and culture, and in their submissions, many students demonstrate insight into their own linguistic practices by reflecting on and implementing course concepts (Minnillo, 2025).

Assigning Model Texts

Additionally, we intentionally assign readings that showcase a diverse range of voices and that employ code-meshing and translanguaging. For example, before asking students to compose their literacy narrative, Keli provides students with example narratives in which authors draw from multiple languages, like Anzaldúa's (1987) "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Sophia similarly introduces students to both written and multimodal texts, such as Karen Leung's (2018) TED Talk, that demonstrate multilingual and translanguaging practices. Sasha assigns readings from previous first-year students to show how linguistic diversity manifests in writing, and she and Kelsey also assigns academic articles, such as Vershawn Ashanti Young's (2010) "Should Writers Use Their Own English?," which demonstrates how scholars, in addition to students, code-mesh in academic contexts.

Sample texts like Anzaldúa's chapter, Leung's video, and Young's article demonstrate how code-meshing and translanguaging work, enhancing students' understanding of how they might implement these practices in their own writing. Having students analyze the effectiveness of these model texts and the rhetorical moves their authors make can also help students better conceptualize their own writing tasks. Moreover, through experiencing a spectrum of linguistic diversity, students often begin to rethink their

definition of “appropriate” academic English and consider incorporating their language(s) into academic writing.

Scaffolding Assignments for CLA

Through trial and error, we have also discovered the importance of intentionally scaffolding our assignments to continuously emphasize concepts of linguistic diversity. In the past, Keli implemented her assignment early in the semester, after she had introduced topics related to identity and writing but before she had discussed them in more depth, so students sometimes struggled to synthesize their linguistic and literacy experiences in more substantive or purposeful ways. Similarly, in past semesters, Sasha discussed multilingualism and had students reflect on their literacies very early in the term. However, she did not design the assignments that followed to reflect these values, leaving students confused about whether they could code-mesh in their later work. In both cases, increased intentional scaffolding in subsequent iterations of these courses helped students to engage more deeply with their linguistic experiences and to continue practicing translanguaging in their future work.

Scaffolding assignments also requires making space for metacognition, allowing students to reflect more meaningfully on concepts surrounding linguistic justice (Lee & Mak, 2018). Opportunities for metacognitive thinking might include lower-stakes writing assignments, in-class activities, or other reflective exercises. For example, Keli’s Language and Literacy Narrative assignment is followed by a reflection later in the semester asking students to share what they have learned about writing and identity, and how their perspectives on their own and others’ languaging practices have evolved. In this way, the sequence of assignments not only encourages deeper self-awareness but also fosters connections between students’ personal experiences and broader classroom discussions about linguistic justice.

Considering Context and Student Agency

Finally, we want to emphasize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to enacting linguistic diversity in the classroom (Özer, 2024). As instructors who teach in a variety of contexts, we recognize that our pedagogical approaches must be responsive to the various backgrounds and identities present in our classrooms. Instructors interested in forwarding linguistic justice should consider the different experiences and knowledges that their students bring to the work of cultivating CLA when designing activities and assignments. For example, students speaking and writing from a dominant positionality might be encouraged to reflect on their linguistic privileges. In contrast, students who occupy minoritized linguistic identities might be provided with opportunities to affirm and employ their linguistic resources in agentic and empowered ways. Instructors must recognize that every classroom—and the contexts, circumstances, and communities of each student composing that classroom—will be different. Cultivating meaningful and

transformative CLA requires tailoring our assignments, activities, and lectures around the unique needs of our students.

In the same spirit, we must also recognize that not all of our students—whether they are multilingual or monolingual—will be receptive to or willing to practice code-meshing or use nonstandardized linguistic practices in their work and must ultimately make their own choice whether or not to separate from hegemonic linguistic standards (Kynard, 2005). Approaching each student with sensitivity and respect will help foster their confidence in using their own languages and help them feel supported in making informed decisions about when and if they choose to deviate from standardized English.

Imagining Expansive Pedagogical Futures Towards Linguistic Justice

As our experiences demonstrate, enacting linguistic justice is an ongoing, dynamic process of learning and growth for both students and instructors alike. However, as graduate student instructors, we are also uniquely positioned to learn new theories and experiment with new pedagogical practices. We encourage our peers to continue trying new techniques and approaches in the classroom to support their students' languaging, despite the hesitations and fears they may have or the setbacks that may occur. Even if the impact is not immediate, the effort we put forth plays a crucial part in challenging conventions and enacting the change we hope to see.

We also want to emphasize the importance of building community in the project of enacting linguistic justice, because part of enacting the values in SRTOL means supporting fellow instructors as we navigate the challenges of implementing meaningful linguistic diversity in our classrooms and celebrating our successes. As we have found in our own collaboration, relying on one another for resources and support helps to normalize teaching towards CLA and linguistic justice. We can seek out other colleagues who want to incorporate translanguaging into their curriculum, try drafting assignments together, and work as a community of practice.

The road to dismantling standardized language ideologies has been, and will continue to be, fraught with difficulty. However, we encourage you to take on these challenges, learn from our mistakes, and work together to move past your fears and imagine more expansive possibilities for your writing classrooms. As graduate student instructors, we lead the future of the field, and, if we are able to collectively make teaching toward linguistic justice the norm, our efforts will enact tangible change—not just for our current students, but for future generations of students as well.

References

- Alim, H. S. (2005). Critical language awareness in the United States: Revisiting issues and revising pedagogies in a resegregated society. *Educational Researcher*, 34(7), 24-31.
- Alvarez, S. P., Wan, A. J., & Lee, E. (2021). Workin' languages: Who we are matters in our writing. *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, 4, 1-17.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Bailey, K. D., Ha, A., & Outlar, A. J. (2023). What color is my voice? Academic writing and the myth of standard English. *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, 5, 63-86.
- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149-171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>
- Flower, L. (2008). *Community literacy and the rhetoric of public engagement*. SIU Press.
- Horner, B., Lu, M. Z., Royster, J. J., & Trimbur, J. (2011). Language difference in writing: Toward a translingual approach. *College English*, 73(3), 303-321.
- Kynard, C. (2005). Getting on the right side of it': Problematizing and rethinking the research paper genre in the college composition course. In Herrington, A. & Moran, C. (Eds.) *Genre across the curriculum* (pp. 128-151). USU Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). *Culturally relevant pedagogy: Asking a different question*. Teachers College Press.
- Lee, I., & Mak, P. (2018). Metacognition and metacognitive instruction in second language writing classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(4), 1085-1097. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.436>
- Leung, K. (2018, March). Embracing multilingualism and eradicating linguistic bias. [Video]. *TED Conferences*. https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_leung_embracing_multilingualism_and_eradicating_linguistic_bias
- Lewis, G., Jones, B., & Baker, C. (2012). Translanguaging: Developing its conceptualisation and contextualisation. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18(7), 655-670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2012.718490>
- Minnillo, S. (2025). Toward radical inclusivity in first year composition: A lesson for CLA, translingual writing, and metacognition development. In G. Park, M. Webb, S. Tanghe, & Q. Charles (Eds.), *Radical Inclusivity: Critical Language Awareness in the Language and Writing Classroom* (pp. 30-38). Multilingual Matters.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (1974). *Resolution on the Students' Right to Their Own Language*. <https://ncte.org/statement/righttoownlanguage/>
- Özer, H. Z. (2024). College Composition Instructors' and Students' Orientations toward Translanguaging in Writing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 59(1), 86-114. <https://doi.org/10.58680/rte2024591126>
- Paris, D. (2021). Culturally sustaining pedagogies and our futures. *The Educational Forum*, 85(4), 364-376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1957634>

- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.982l873k2ht16m77>
- Perryman-Clark, S., Kirkland, D.E., & Jackson, A. (2014). Understanding the complexities associated with what it means to have the right to your own language. In S. Perryman-Clark, D.E. Kirkland, & A. Jackson (Eds.), *Students' Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook* (pp. 1-16). Bedford St. Martins.
- Sánchez-Martín, C. (2021). Beyond language difference in writing: Investigating complex and equitable language practices. *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, 4, 269–280. <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/writingspaces4/sanchez-martin.pdf>
- Shapiro, S. (2022). *Cultivating critical language awareness in the writing classroom*. Routledge.
- Shapiro, S., Cox, M., Shuck, G., & Simnitt, E. (2016). Teaching for agency: From appreciating linguistic diversity to empowering multilingual matters. *Composition Studies*, 44(1), 31-52.
- Thompson, F., & Pokhrel, L. H. (2025). Language ideologies and critical language pedagogies in college writing programs: A literature review. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 21(1).
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>
- Young, V. A. (2021). 2020 CCCC chair's address: Say they name in Black English: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Aura Rosser, Trayvon Martin, and the need to move away from writing to literacies in CCCC and rhetoric and composition. *College Composition & Communication*, 72(4), 623-639. <https://doi.org/10.58680/cc202131445>