

INTRODUCTION

LANGUAGE, DIALECTS, AND WRITING

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Guest Editor

Writing and language arts teachers have no doubt experienced the increasing diversity of their students and the pedagogical challenges that such differences bring to the classroom. Linguistic and cultural diversity in today's schools and universities has caused many teachers to question their effectiveness as literacy educators. Indeed, many are overwhelmed by the challenges of literacy education when so many of their students come to the classroom with widely varying literacy backgrounds and skills. One persistent outcome of this changing climate is the achievement gap between African American students and white students—perhaps the most visible evidence of our failure to understand the connection between our students' home languages and the language of school. The problem has escalated in recent years, affecting not only the education of African Americans but of all students whose language and culture are different from that of school and their teachers. How can educators impact the literacy lives of these students? How can teachers integrate their students' language varieties—their dialects and styles—in meaningful classroom instruction on writing?

This issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* addresses these concerns by providing informative discussions of language and diversity as well as classroom ideas and strategies that other teachers have used successfully to meet the needs of diverse

students. The issue focuses on language education, our knowledge and attitudes toward different languages as well as dialects of a single language, and on pedagogical approaches that invite language differences in the context of teaching academic writing.

Veteran teachers may recall an earlier period in our history when educators took their concerns about diversity to national conferences for resolution. In the early 1970s, teachers were similarly concerned about the increasing linguistic diversity among their students and its impact on literacy learning. An important policy document that grew out of such discussions is the *Students' Right to Their Own Language*, originally published in 1974, recently revised by the Language Policy Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and endorsed unanimously by the National Council of Teachers of English. This policy answers the question that teachers then and now face: "What should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds?" Needless to say, it is a professional statement that all teachers should read because it addresses important sociolinguistic concepts in language learning that provide a foundation for teachers to begin to understand their students' linguistic and cultural differences.

It is clear that most teachers are aware of the differences in their classrooms and want to create an inviting, safe environment for student learning. It is also clear that most teachers respect their students' differences and want to prepare students to live and work in a society that has become increasingly multicultural and multilingual. However, what teachers actually do in their classrooms to address the needs of diverse students is much less clear, especially in regard to their students' linguistic differences. One of the reasons the "Students' Right To Their Own Language" policy failed to inspire real change in the decade of the 1970s is that teachers didn't know how to revise their classroom practices to create an environment conducive to language learning for all

students. In other words, while we understood in theory the importance of valuing the linguistic and cultural differences of our students, we lacked the knowledge and preparation needed to change our pedagogy and classroom practices. Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels remind us that students are keenly aware of the “double-binds, mixed messages, and schizophrenic signals” they receive in school, and “as a teacher what you do is immeasurably more important than what you say” (58).

If we want our students to appreciate language in all its diverse forms and styles while also mastering edited American English, then we need to expand our own language repertoire to include the language of our students, to share our knowledge of the interplay of language varieties around us, and to act as literacy models for our students. Because language is an intimate, inseparable part of identity and culture, pedagogy that privileges one variety—“standard” English—with the hope that students will then succeed in the mainstream culture has proven ineffective, leaving too many students without the resources of language they need to succeed. “Despite [our] good intentions,” writes Lisa Delpit, “if we cannot understand and even celebrate the wonders of the language these children bring with them to the school. . . then we have little hope of convincing them that we hold their best interest at heart” (47-48). We are beginning to see a resurgence of activity focusing on language, diversity, and writing at local and national conferences as well as in our professional publications. My hope is that the ideas and practical strategies in this volume inspire teachers to rethink how they approach language and literacy and how they can assist all students in extending their abilities as speakers and writers.

Featured in this issue are five articles by authors who offer different perspectives on language and different approaches to inviting language awareness and diversity into the writing classroom. In addition, readers will find an insightful essay by Peter Elbow, who was invited to respond to the featured articles,

and finally a review essay based on four recently published books. These articles reflect a broader view of language than is customarily taught in today's classrooms, and they explore the many, often "unheard," voices of our students. Once made a part of the curriculum, these voices speak volumes about students' language competence and the rich meanings that diversity brings to the classroom. Together, the articles focus much needed attention on the value of linguistic and cultural diversity and, perhaps more importantly at this stage, will leave our readers with strategies and activities to engage students in language learning and the process of discovering meanings through words. I hope this issue of JTW complements and enriches our readers' understanding of language varieties and ways to value students' language and language histories in the classroom.

Lahcen Ezzaher's "Writing with an Accent: A Marginal Multilingual Voice Seeking a Place in Academe," the lead article, is a multi-layered literacy narrative that begins in the city of Fes, Morocco, where the author developed his "accent" in a multilingual environment, traversing the languages and cultural spaces of Arabic, French, and English. His thoughts on life as an immigrant in America are deep and poignant. Now a writer and professor at the University of Northern Colorado, Ezzaher shares his desire to help student-writers understand and experience "what writing is about," and he offers an approach to literacy that is rich in substance and inspiring in its unique perspective (27).

Ezzaher's narrative is complemented by Gail Y. Okawa's "Personalizing the Intangible Through Historical Acts and Artifacts: Language, Attitudes, Language History, and Language Heritage in the Classroom and Beyond." Okawa writes about situating students' language learning in their particular geographical locales, and her ideas are community-centered, innovative, and practical. She provides many examples of ways teachers can use regional immigration and settlement patterns to help students understand the linguistic and historical significance

of the “place” they inhabit. Her research at the Smithsonian Institution uncovers a number of family language and literacy artifacts that tell stories about language maintenance and language loss. Okawa demonstrates how teachers can involve their students in similar research in her description of a Heritage Language Artifact Project, an extension of the language autobiography assignment she describes earlier in her article. Okawa’s work is excellent not only for the way it describes specific language-centered writing activities but also for the rich display of her own research and the stories that readers will find interesting and engaging.

Eleanor Kutz, Jackie Cornog, and Denise Paster, in “Beyond Grammar: Building Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom,” describe a writing curriculum in which students explore their own language uses with the “tools of ethnographic research,” transferring their analytical skills to a wide range of discourse types and further developing their abilities as writers in academic settings (66). The authors share their students’ observations about language and style as they reflect on their learning, and their students’ voices are compelling and persuasive. Whereas Kutz et al. integrate a wide variety of discourse types and styles—from home and community varieties to academic discourse—in writing instruction, Arthur Palacas focuses his attention on African American language and culture. In “Write About Ebonics: A Composition Course at the University of Akron,” he describes his experience working with African American writers and the initiative he undertook to include his students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. His composition course on ebonics, targeted for an audience of predominately white students, serves to legitimize the heritage of linguistic-cultural minorities. Palacas is breaking new ground at a traditionally white, middle-class university, and the success of his efforts to create an inclusive learning environment will no doubt impact other programs and schools.

In “Rewriting School: Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom,” David E. Kirkland addresses the changing student demographic in today’s K-12 classrooms and suggests that teachers transform their pedagogy to equip students with a “dynamic textual toolkit. . .” (84). Comparing traditional writing classrooms with critical writing classrooms, Kirkland shows how teachers can use critical pedagogy to develop and extend their students’ textual experience through visual, musical, and commercial forms of expression. He argues that such forms of texts are “empowering for students, liberating to their voices, and beneficial to us all” (94).

Finally, in his essay responding to these articles, Peter Elbow takes us to a much earlier period in our history—the Middle Ages—when multiple languages, vernaculars, and cultures interacted and flourished before being replaced by “purer” national languages in the early Renaissance. Considering parallel cases of language loss in the U.S., Elbow provides some explanation for why, historically, we seem to want to move away from linguistic and cultural diversity, but he also points to evidence suggesting that linguistic and cultural varieties are worth preserving—“‘signs’ that humans are also good at living with multiple languages and often desire to *have* them and *save* them” (133). Other evidence, certainly, of Elbow’s “signs” are the four recently published books on language and diversity reviewed by MaryAnn K. Crawford, who writes about these books in the context of her own experience with language and with learning about language. In addition to providing thoughtful and well-informed reviews of these publications, Crawford’s piece—like others in this volume—reflects the author’s deep commitment to her subject and a passion to make a difference in the lives of students and their teachers.

In an interview with Anne Flanagan, Poet Mari Evans commented that when students say they can rap, they have opened the door to a wonderful teaching tool. We need to knock on those

doors—and continue knocking—if we hope to teach our students *other* language varieties such as edited American English. This volume and the wealth of information now appearing in books and journals lead to these doors.

Works Cited

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