

# We Care a Lot: Linguistic Justice In the Classroom

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## FACTS

Students of color make up the majority of the students in schools in America.

*Yet,* Latinas and Black women ([as of Fall 2016](#)) make up only two percent of the full-time faculty teaching in degree-granting higher education institutions (two year and four year) – just two percent of Black and Latina professors teach full-time with benefits.

An Opportunity: Linguistic Justice

## Linguistic Justice Theorems...

Language is connected to race.

Language is [impacted by] race.

[Racism is connected to linguistic superiority.]

***anti-Black*** racism is connected to ***white linguistic superiority***.

--April Baker-Bell except where bracketed

# No Such Thang as “Standard English”:

*Standard English* is recognized as *normalized English*

What we currently consider “standard” jus reflects the style of speaking + habits of the dominant race, class, and gender in U.S. society (Kynard qtd in Baker-Bell)

Standard English is a construct:

The English language at the beginning of its recorded history was already divided into distinct regional dialects. These enjoyed fairly equal prestige for centuries. However, the centralization of English political and commercial life at London gradually gave the dialect spoken there a preeminence over other dialects. This process was far advanced when printing was invented; consequently, the London dialect became the dialect of the printing press, and the dialect of the printing press became the so-called "standard"...(Committee on CCCC Language Statement 7)

# The Burning Question

Is it possible to ~~allow~~ encourage students to write in their own voice and/or invite other Englishes and still prepare them for transfer, for the job market, for the real world?





Can we as educators of students from all backgrounds in a country in which the majority of students are students of color, in good conscience, continue to uphold American Edited English, Standard/Academic English, or white English, as the communicative norm?

# 10 Ways to Tackle Linguistic Bias in Our Class

It's time for us as faculty members to recognize and combat our prejudices when it comes to how our students speak and write, argues Catherine Savini.

By [Catherine Savini](#) // January 27, 2021





## Assess students on what you are actually teaching them

Many professors feel as if they are not doing their jobs if they don't mark students down for not writing in standard academic English, or they fear that they are misleading students and not preparing them for "the real world." But when we assess for standard academic English, we are putting multilingual and multidialectal students at a distinct disadvantage. Asao B. Inoue argues that we should grade so that "every student, no matter where they come from or how they speak or write, can have access to the entire range of final course grades possible." So don't penalize students for not writing in SAE and consider implementing grading contracts that value labor, effort and process rather than quality, standardization and product.

--Savini

## Design discipline-appropriate approaches to combating linguistic prejudice, and provide students opportunities to write in their own voice.

For example, in the writing center, we invite students to freewrite in their native language. In my courses, I ask students to write for public audiences. Public discourse provides more opportunity for diverse dialects and code-meshing, and students can present rich academic research and advance sophisticated arguments to broad audiences.

A Spanish professor I work with adjusted his curriculum when he recognized that he was valuing Spain's dialect above Puerto Rico's. A communications professor encourages her students to write blog posts in their native dialects. A music professor integrates songs with diverse dialects and invites students in the class and outside experts to discuss those dialects.

--Savini

**Work harder to understand students who are multilingual/multidialectal both in writing and orally.**

**Ask questions** in the margins when you don't understand students' writing and avoid feedback such as "awk" or "unclear." When it comes to oral participation, don't rush students, don't correct them and don't finish their sentences unless they ask for help. Create group guidelines for discussion in class so that everyone listens generously.

Don't view students who are learning English or who speak/write in Black Vernacular English as a problem that needs fixing.

## Add a syllabus statement that values linguistic diversity

Diverse languages and dialects are welcome in this classroom. As we communicate with one another, keep in mind that the reader/listener should work as hard as the writer/speaker in the communication process. This means that we will listen patiently, work to understand one another, seek out clarification when necessary and avoid finishing each other's sentences or correcting grammatical errors unless invited to do so.

--Savini

## What is Next Level English/*NLE*?

*NLE* is a series of theories and lessons that aim to engage and center minoritized students and the cultural wealth they bring to academia.

*NLE* invites students to cultivate authentic voice.

*NLE* strives to be a form of linguistic justice.

# NLE Own-Voice Summaries

- Read and annotate \_\_\_\_\_
- Write \_\_\_\_\_ sentence summary in a style/tone that matches your feelings about what you read
- You can be as informal and/or creative as you want
- **Do not state your opinion outright**
- The style and tone of the response should serve as your reaction to the content you summarize

# Own-Voice Summary Example

Well I... reckon I should feel insulted by the way Twain depicted old Jim the runaway slave. Had him talkin like he hardly knew how to talk, that is, all broken English like, but I get what he was tryin ta do. He was tryin to take the people back to the South during times of slavery and give them a feel of what it was like and how da people spoke. I wasn't alive back in them times either so I can't say fo sho what they sounded like. I think or I reckon they did kinda sound like that from other stories I've read that used similar vernacular and even some non-fiction too. It kinda hurt to hear the N word used so much. I didn't anticipate that. It also hurt to hear Huck talk to Jim as if he was stupid. If Jim had been a real person I think he would have taught Huck a thing or two about life and survival because his had been so much harder than Huck's.

So, Huck and Jim were on the raft South of Cairo and the fog was thick as reeds. Huck spent a lot of the time on the raft worrying about the direction the raft was headed, and where he was headed morally. He felt guilty about freeing a man from slavery because he might have hurt the fragile feelings of that poor poor slaver woman, and the thought of his "sin" made him miserable the whole time. All of his implicit biases came around to play, and all the racist talk of enslaved peoples' supposed grift and greed and all that he was raised with clashed with his decency of action. He seemed to pray for time that they'd never reach their destination and have to reckon with the choice he made, and even half-promised to himself that he'd never make another like it. Eventually they came upon some slave-catchers looking for an easy buck, and Huck's guilt was overpowered by his ability to somehow do something decent through cowardice, and he tricked them into leaving Jim alone. To top it all off, they were run over by a steamer on the river, and lost sight of Jim.

# NLE Lesson: Invite Students to Add Prologues

Sometimes, we make decisions in our writing that may surprise readers, such as using a concept from our positionality, using 'I', or using terminology or spellings that may not be mainstream. If you want your readers not to be caught off-guard by these, try including a short prologue to help them understand what's coming or explain your writing choices. For example:

A brief note re: language in this piece—As part of our work as Black women compositionists and scholars, we opt to utilize non-standard English in our writing as a way to reaffirm our various identities, and as a way to speak back against white supremacist standards of language in academia....With this in mind, dis us and we cussin, reflectin, and telling it how it is—the way we see fit. (Hull, Shelton, McKoy)



# NLE Lesson: How Would You Write This?

Take a standard publication or speech put forth by a corporation (e.g., Kaiser Permanente) or a politician/government agency (e.g. POTUS or CDC). How would you write it for:

1. Your age group
2. Social media
3. Your communities
4. ...

# Conclusion

1. Linguistic Justice puts students first/de-centers instructors.
2. Practicing linguistic justice demonstrates we care about students
3. Practicing linguistic justice is tangible evidence we value diversity
4. **Tangible next step, write your syllabus statement and then use it to inform classroom design and lessons**
5. Workshop it at your next department meeting
6. Let's all meet in month, or so, to share statements/lessons

# Add a syllabus statement that values linguistic diversity

- Adding a statement is a super important signal for all
- Adding just the statement alone is not enough
- Provide opportunities for students to flex their voices
- Be a model
- Drop the teacher personae and be yourself
- Where applicable model different styles of writing that you use and/or that define you: Discussion board instructions, assignment instructions, f2f
- Use a different voice for different modes based on your perception of their formality

Questions?

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That's It...for Now

