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The Same Conversational Page?: Talking with Students about Language and Diversity

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Abstract. Through surveys and focus group conversations, we studied students' experiences with instruction in writing-intensive (WI) courses at our urban R1 university and their awareness of and attitudes about linguistic diversity. Specifically, we have explored discrepancies between students' experiences with languaging, language judgment, and our university's diversity and our goals as teacher-scholars who seek a university context more ready for writing instruction that embraces linguistic diversity. Echoing Baker-Bell's (2020) discussion of students' "linguistic double-consciousness," our analysis demonstrates the misalignment between the valuing of linguistic diversity emphasized in contemporary scholarship and the perspectives on languaging held by our direct instructional audience: the students at our university. Importantly, while most student survey participants agreed that "bringing linguistic diversity into the classroom enhances their writing," most student focus group participants generally implied a much different experience, describing writing "formally" or "in Standard American English" for classes, with no suggestion that their writing was positively affected by linguistic diversity. As we work to attend to these ideological differences, this study points us to strategies that will help us get on the same conversational page with students in our WI courses about linguistic diversity.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, writing-intensive, languaging, focus groups

Scholars persuasively argue for the integration of linguistic diversity in secondary and post-secondary writing courses (e.g., Young, 2010; Baker-Bell, 2020; Charity Hudley et al., 2022). However, understanding students' experiences with and perspectives on college languaging is an important first step in accomplishing linguistic justice at the university. Our research team, composed of faculty and graduate students in Communication, Education, and English, has worked from a shared understanding that foundational courses in languaging–courses that we teach–are places where direct instruction in writing and speaking can and should include attention to the linguistic diversity reflected in our university's student body (see also Jankens et al., 2023). Our research is founded in the conviction that understanding the experiences of students and instructors, and building pedagogy, programs, and policies from that understanding, will be more sustainable than top-down and nominal interventions (Jones et al., 2021). To amplify the voices of

students at our diverse urban university, we used surveys and focus groups to explore two research questions[1]:

- How do students experience instruction in writing and formal speaking in writing-intensive (WI) courses?
- How do students express their awareness of and attitudes about linguistic and rhetorical diversity?

As we report below, the ways students in our study talked about languaging–their performance and action of language as they develop academic identities through their university experiences (Bloome & Beauchemin, 2016)--suggests that their lived experiences put them on a different conversational page than scholars who argue for instruction in linguistic diversity. So, to strategize instruction, we need to get on the same page as students. Presenting our analysis of surveys and focus groups, we demonstrate the disjunction between the hopes and expectations of teacher-scholars working in these areas (ourselves included) and those of our direct instructional audience: the students at our university. The ways we hear "linguistic double-consciousness" (Baker-Bell, 2020) manifest in some students' responses points us to the need to talk differently and more productively with students about what it means to bring their diverse language practices into the classroom. Our discussion illustrates possibilities readers may encounter when engaging in dialogues with students at their respective institutions as well as instructional strategies that might support the construction of shared vocabulary, goals, and practices for linguistic diversity in the classroom.

Context: Why Talking with Students at this Urban Research University Matters

Wayne State University, located in Detroit, Michigan, annually enrolls over 16,000 undergraduate students (Quick Facts, 2021). The university is known for having "the most diverse student body" in our state (Diversity and Inclusion, 2023). In Fall 2021, when we collected the majority of the data for this study, 47.5% of undergraduate students self-reported as white, 15.9% as Black or African American, 12.6% as Asian, 8.8% as Middle Eastern, 6.5% as Hispanics of any race, 1.8% as U.S. non-residents, 4.2% as two or more races, and 0.2% as American Indian or Alaskan Native (Diversity Dashboard, 2021); while the term "diverse" mostly references race in this context, we acknowledge that it includes other markers of identity, background, and experiences. As reflected in our study, this diversity means that many students speak one or more languages in addition to English, making our university an effective site for studying questions about linguistic diversity.

[1] This pilot study and subsequent study were approved by our institution's IRB (IRB-21-01-3186 and IRB-21-08-3879) and included participants' informed consent.

Literature Review: College Language Performances

Students enter college both with long-developed standard language ideologies (Lippi-Green, 2012; Inoue, 2021) and experiences with linguistic bias and microaggressions (Charity Hudley et al., 2022, pp. 28-29; Diab et al., 2019). As students from various racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds attempt to figure out how to be writers in a university, the "habits of white language" are often taken for granted (Inoue, 2021). For example, Faison (2022) observed that while Black students find ways to honor Black Language, they "wanted to be fluent writers in [White Mainstream English or WME]" (p. 277; see also Slinkard & Gevers, 2020; Shapiro, 2022). Students from any language background–but especially Black students–may be accustomed to being asked to code-switch or feeling like they must use language that reflects WME in school and professional settings (Williams-Farrier, 2016; Young, 2018). However, students may be less familiar with code-meshing, "a combination of so-called home language and school language" (Young, 2018, p. 75) or less sure about where code-meshing is acceptable (Baker-Bell, 2020).

For these reasons, scholars are invested in reshaping the ways that both students and writing instructors think about languaging in writing classrooms, especially through strategies that support critical reflection on non-dominant languages and linguistic practices (e.g., Young, 2010; Inoue, 2015; Davila, 2016; Kenney & Sreckovic, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2020; Slinkard & Gevers, 2020; Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2020). In turn, as articulated by Vengadasalam (2020), "Teaching students–including those from marginalized communities–to acquire voices and usher in change through their writing restores equity into the classroom and academic writing" (p. 13). Before adapting approaches from scholarship, however, we must understand our students' experiences with languaging, allowing our research team to take an approach to local research that is reflective, reflexive, and iterative (Jones et al., 2021), with contextually appropriate instructional implications.

Methods: Investigating Students' Languaging Experiences

Our research team includes white, Black, and Latina members with a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds, including members who were first-generation college students, some who are multilingual, and a range of experiences teaching written and spoken communication as well as training teachers.

For this study, we invited participation in surveys and focus group sessions from students in WI courses across disciplines to listen to students outside of our own disciplinary areas. Data was gathered across three semesters–Winter 2021, Fall 2021, and Winter 2022–when classes were mostly held online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three white team members and one Black team member facilitated focus groups; one Latina team member served in a support role. Further, and significant to this study, in sessions where a Black, female member of the research team served as the primary interviewer, students seemed more forthcoming with descriptions of experiences tied to race. Individual interviewers' approaches may

have also influenced the depth or direction of students' offerings by their use of follow-up questions, affirmations, or shared experiences.

In this paper, while we draw from all six focus group sessions to provide a larger set of student responses, we present survey data only from the revised instrument distributed in Fall 2021 and Winter 2022, and not our pilot survey (Winter 2021). We used a critical constructivist approach in our analysis (Kincheloe, 2005; Levitt, 2021), which amplifies students' voices in knowledge-making, considers our positions as researchers and teachers of WI courses, and unveils the complexity of language ideologies at our urban research university.

Surveys

A twenty-question survey elicited demographic information and examples of students' experience of writing instruction and awareness of and attitudes about linguistic and rhetorical diversity. Several Likert-range questions regarding aspects of writing instruction were presented, along with three forced-choice questions about students' attitudes toward instructional experiences. The survey included an option to participate in a focus group.

We distributed the survey online using the university's survey tool, Qualtrics. Links to the survey were directly emailed to students, along with information about the study. In Fall 2021, we reached out to over 1,200 students, and in Winter 2022, over 400 students. Seventy-one surveys were opened and begun and 48 completed.

Focus Groups

Our decision to use focus groups and not interviews was theoretical and practical. Because they are one-on-one, interviews may be more likely to promote disclosure, particularly in discussions of sensitive topics such as race (Kruger et al., 2019). However, the focus group context allowed us to better see whether students shared experiences and ways of talking about languaging. Holding focus groups on Zoom, a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have supported rapport between participants and researchers (Archibald et al., 2019), provided easier access for students, and allowed students to maintain privacy, which might have further facilitated students' discussion of sensitive topics (Gray et al., 2020, p. 1297).

Participants

Of the 48 students who completed the survey, 13 students self-identified as Asian, 12 as white, 11 as Arab-American/Middle Eastern, nine as Black/African-American, two as two or more races, and one as Latino/Hispanic. 36 students (~75%) had completed 90 or more university credits. Twenty students identified speaking one or more languages in addition to English, including Arabic, Urdu, Spanish, Albanian, and Gujarati. Survey participants included majors from several colleges across the university, including liberal arts and sciences, engineering, communication and fine arts, and business.

Twelve participants joined us in focus groups. Three were public health majors, two neuroscience majors, two psychology majors, and one each in sociology, media arts, and computer technology. Two participants neither disclosed their majors in the survey nor referenced them in the focus group session. Demographic questions were not part of the focus group protocol; however, transcript analysis revealed that seven participants reported speaking a language other than English in their home environment, and/or being bilingual with proficiency in a second language, including Marathi, Bengali, Bosnian, and Pashto. Two participants described using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics outside of school.

Limitations

Due to COVID-19, most WI courses from which we recruited participants were facilitated online during the semesters we conducted surveys and focus groups. Pandemic-induced changes to student work-life balance, mental and physical health, engagement in the online context, and loss of resources resulted in declines in confidence and increased anxiety for students (Prokes & Housel, 2021). Consequently, student participation in extracurricular activities, including research studies, was low, as is evident in the small survey respondent population (n=48) and the overall number of focus group participants (n=12). This size limits the examples of student experiences presented in the overall study. Further, we did not use gender quotas in our recruitment, ask questions about gender in our survey, or ask participants to identify their gender or sex. Identity markers of interviewers and participants can uncover the hidden layers of power during discussions about race, particularly when interviewers and participants share similar racial backgrounds (Nayak, 2006; Hendrix, 2002; Tamale, 1996). Overlaps or disjunctions between these identities can affect student comfortability with answering questions as well as interviewer ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal communication.

Survey and Focus Group Data

Using an inductive approach, we observed the reported experiences of respondents and worked from those toward more general conclusions. We reviewed survey responses and annotated focus group transcripts to determine patterns and themes in students' responses, presented below.

Survey themes

Analysis of survey responses revealed two patterns. First, on the whole, students are confident and comfortable with their experiences with writing instruction. For example, when asked about their experiences with feedback on their writing, students overwhelmingly described fair responses to their writing by instructors and little correction or feedback directing them to write more formally (see Figures 1, 2).

Figure 1

Student experience with fairness in instructor feedback on writing

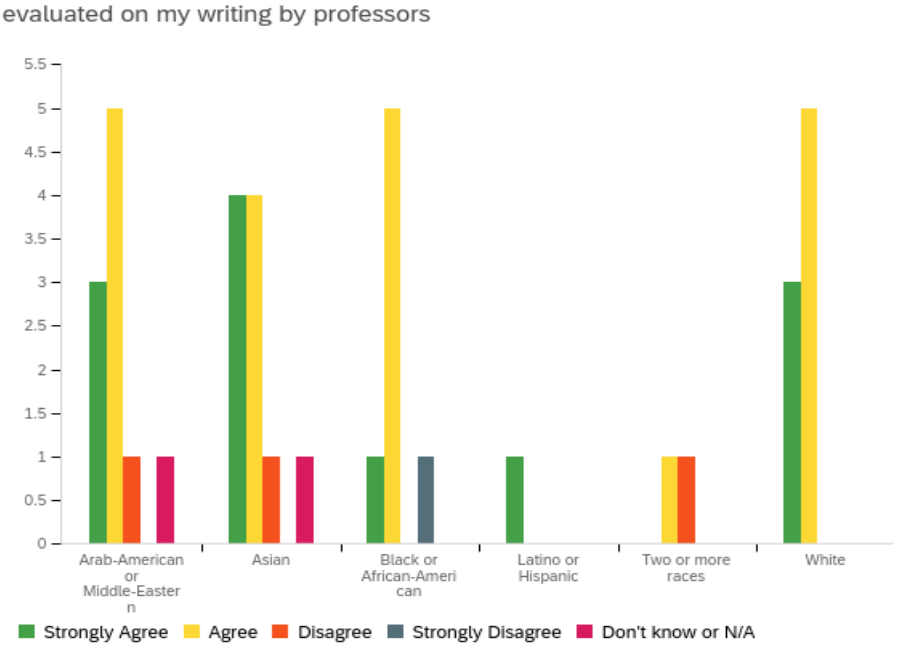
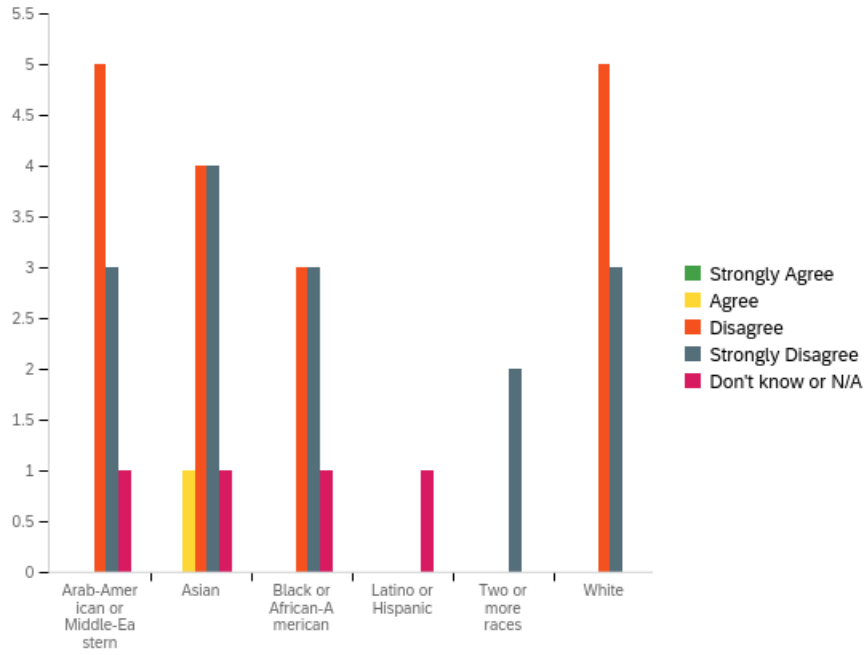


Figure 2

Student experience with feedback on formality of writing



Second, survey responses indicate high comfort levels with academic discourse and sense of support from writing instructors, and high levels of confidence regarding college-level communication tasks (see Figures 3, 4, 5).

Figure 3

Student comfort level with academic writing/discourse

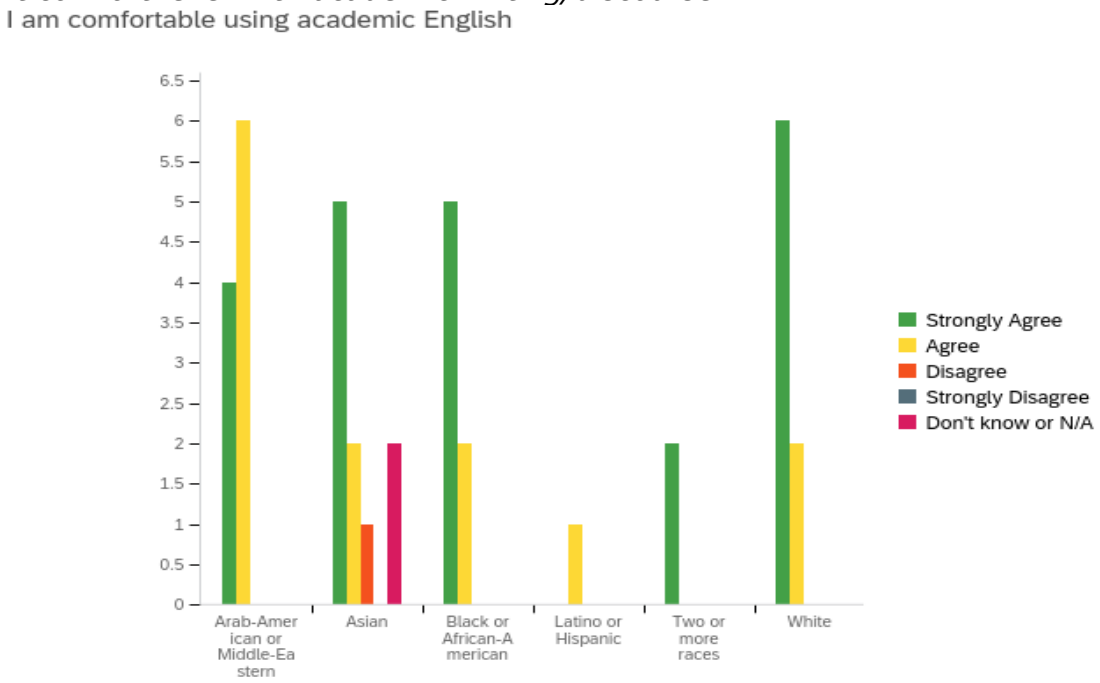


Figure 4

Perceived support from writing instructors

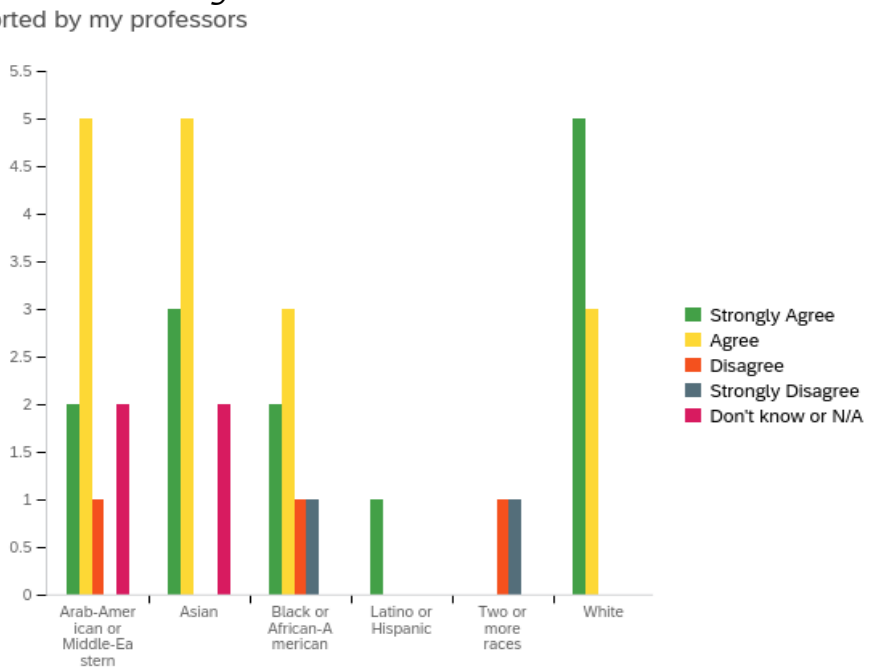
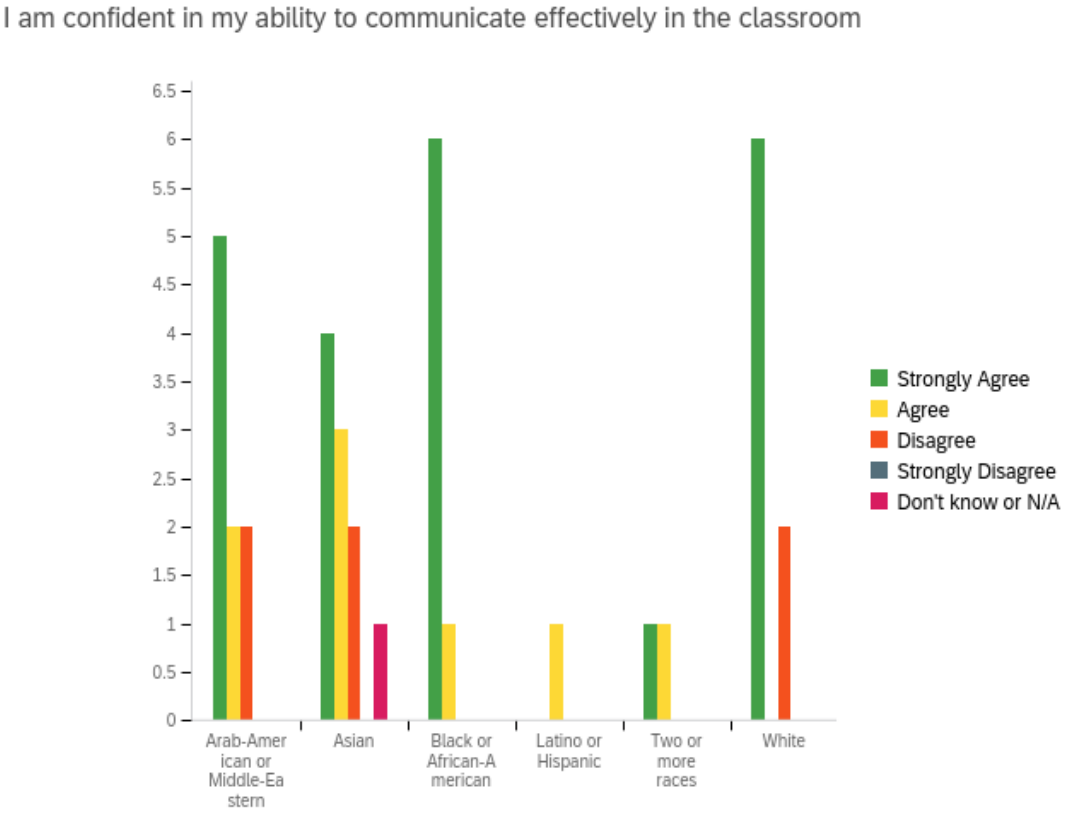


Figure 5

Student confidence to communicate in the classroom



Survey results were almost evenly split between students who agreed (n=14) and disagreed (n=13) that their racial/ethnic identity determines how others respond to their languaging. While most survey respondents said that bringing linguistic diversity into the classroom enhances their writing (see Figure 6), most also felt that, at least sometimes, they need to change how they use language in the classroom (see Figure 7).

Figure 6

Student perceptions of the effects of linguistic diversity in the classroom

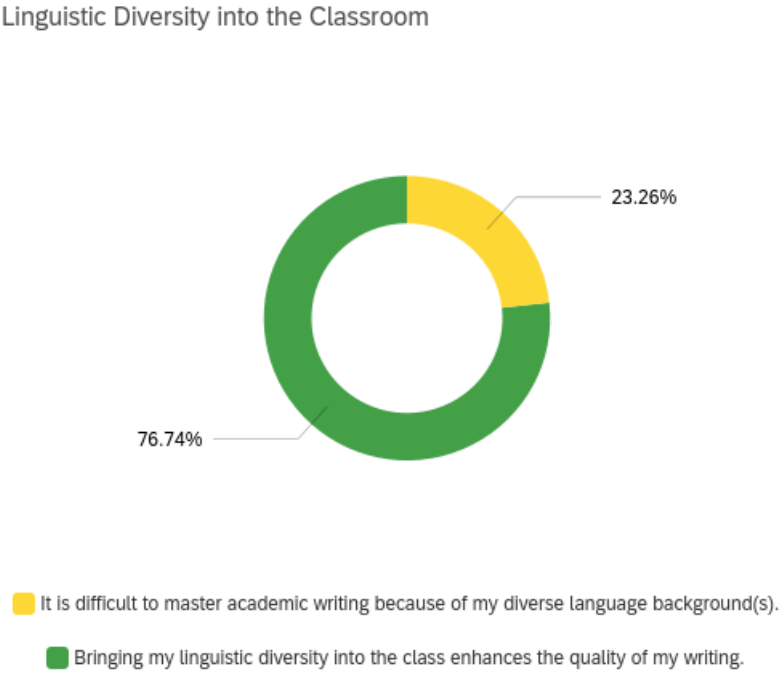
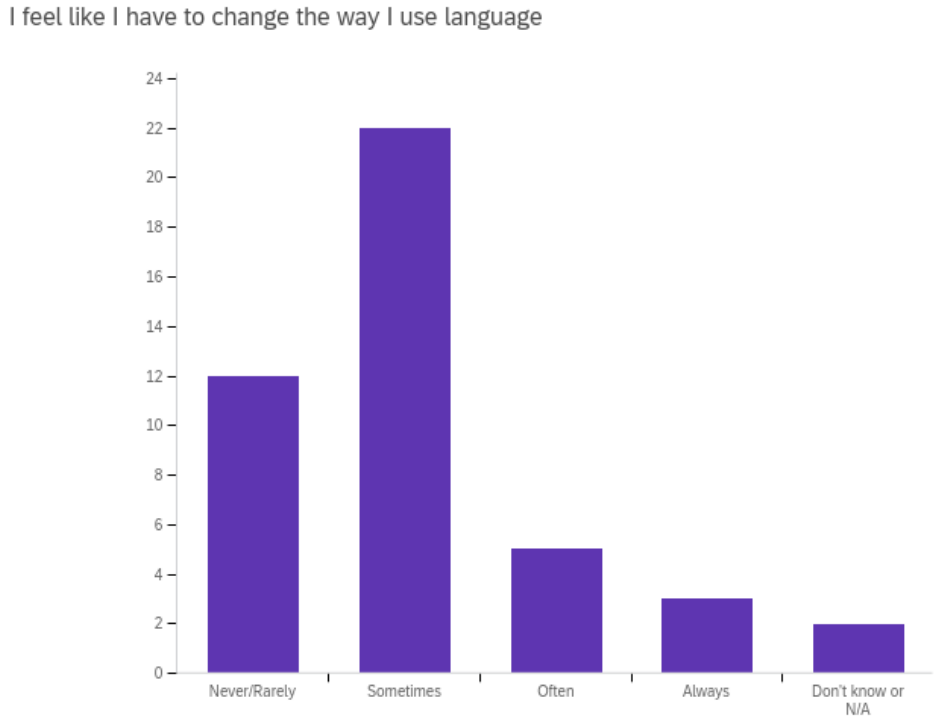


Figure 7

Student perception of a need to change language



In response to our final survey question: "Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experience using language and literacy practices in Wayne State classes?" one student wrote about their experience with racism in online classes, and why they choose not to include their picture in their online profile:

> [I]t's either a really great experience or an awful one. There's no in between, I've also learned I tend to do better grades wise if I don't have the picture, which is showcasing my skin color on my account as a student. I also am spoken to differently and with respect, without a photo.

Another student explained that ease of "switching" language styles changes with the modality of communication: "Although, I don't find it particularly difficult to switch to an academic writing style, I do find that speaking/presenting in class is quite challenging because I am unable to use the same vocabulary which I employ in daily conversations with my friends." Two students remarked on challenges in their experiences as ESL students, and one student said there is a lack of consistency between language expectations from instructors. These results indicate an unresolved tension in how students experience instruction in WI courses.

Focus group themes

Interviewers asked focus group participants questions about their language use inside and outside of the classroom and their experiences with writing instruction. To both center student voices and focus the data for analysis, we analyzed the complete range of student responses to two protocol questions that aligned most closely with our research questions. Student responses to these questions demonstrate the ideological and experiential complexities of writing instruction at our university, which we present in the themes below.

When asked if they have ever felt judged for their languaging based on their race or ethnic background, students said they have not, but often qualified their responses.

To understand the degree to which students have experienced language judgment or linguistic racism in their writing classes, we asked them whether they ever felt their ideas were judged by professors based on their language, skin color, or racial or ethnic identity. Students' immediate responses generally indicated that they do not believe they have personally experienced this kind of judgment or linguistic racism at our university, however some offered qualifications to that response (Table 1).

Table 1

Students' initial responses to "Have you ever felt that your professors judge your ideas based on the kind of language you use to express yourself or based on the color of your skin or your racial/ethnic identity?"

Student	Excerpted Response
Ameya	"Definitely not here, no."
Brian	"No, not personally. [During group work] I've never really had anything like that, like people getting made fun of, but we definitely have had to take someone's work and then redo it, when it's not really going along with the rest of the group."
Caria	"I feel like it's really rare to have a professor outright say, like, 'Oh, I didn't like this because, you know, you spoke like blah, blah, blah race or ethnicity.' It would be pretty [laughing] insane for the professor to outright say that."
Diane	[did not answer]
Elise	"I've been fortunate enough to never have felt like I've had that experience, especially here at Wayne State."
Farha	"At Wayne State, I am, luckily, in a diverse environment, so professors were not really judgmental towards me. I didn't see any, like, facial expressions that show any type of bias…. [But] there are some times where they can tell that I'm kind of an amateur or a beginner in understanding some things, so I would have my own type of perspective in conversations, but it's not like they were biased or mean about it."
Giana	"I don't feel as if they judge my ideas. But I do feel like they challenge them more than maybe my other, um, white student counterparts."
Haimi	"I don't really feel like my professors judge my ideas based on the color of my skin but . . . I'm not sure if this counts, but I have a tendency to make my writing very concise, short, to the point, and I feel like it's a little bit unfair that I lose points for that."
Inaam	"I don't have an example for this."
Jenny	"I have not personally had any experience in an issue like this, and I don't recall anything happening in any of my classes that I've ever noticed. So I don't think so, no."
Keira	"So it's never happened to me, but I have seen in one class in particular….one student, if they said things, wasn't their idea was devalued, but if they had said things kind of like, just speaking in slang,

	then the professor went 'Ah--okay,' but then if another person would say the exact same thing, just changing their language slightly, or just speaking more professionally then he'd be like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, that makes a lot of sense.' But that was only one time, like, literally one class, and I just recognized it as being like, 'Oh, this sucks for that person,' because I understand what they're saying. They're saying something that's very valuable, but it might be lost in translation."
Laily	"Luckily, I haven't had any experiences with that. Or I haven't really known anyone that did when it came to writing at Wayne State."

Responses like "not here, no," "not personally," and "So it's never happened to me, but…" indicate that while students may feel they have not experienced instructors at our university judging their language based on their race or ethnicity, they may have experienced or observed it elsewhere or observed others experiencing this judgment. This judgment may have come from classmates, as Diane later related in an anecdote about a classmate making fun of their attempts to write formally, and as Laily, a multilingual student, shared in their description of rarely receiving feedback from instructors on "errors" in English, but often feeling embarrassed that peers would "correct" them. Like Giana, students might perceive that instructors "challenge" them more than they challenge their white peers.

Often, students' descriptions of the diversity of our university emerged in follow-up responses to this question about language judgment. For example, after describing a classroom scene wherein they observed the instructor criticizing another student for using AAVE, Caria reflected on their experience a Muslim student attending a "super diverse" university, where there are "a lot of students from a lot of different backgrounds." "[P]eople who are exposed to more stuff tend to be more open," Caria said. Similarly, Farha stated that at their previous university, "diversity was very low" and now, "luckily [they are] in a diverse environment" and do not experience language judgment.

We pursued students' experiences with diversity at our university directly by asking them, "What does diversity look like at Wayne State University?" (Table 2).

Table 2

Student responses to "What does diversity look like at Wayne State University?"

Student	Excerpted quotes
Inaam	"Well, I do see a lot of people from different backgrounds at Wayne State.
Haimi	"…diversity [is] just, like, people from different backgrounds coming together."

Keira	"I would say Wayne State has been incredibly inclusive . . . at least in the classroom setting."
Jenny	"I would think a lot of different races and ethnicities, and same within the classrooms, working with students and collaborating with people, different ideas, different thoughts. I think that's a very key part of diversity."
Laily	"Diversity to me is more like people from different cultures coming together, speaking different languages, different ethnicities all collaborating with each other . . . I would say . . . Wayne State is a diverse community, because we have people from different backgrounds, different places . . . we're all studying in one location, but we all have different backgrounds when it comes to language, culture."

These descriptions primarily center on the presence of people from a variety of backgrounds. With the exception of Laily, students did not include language in their descriptions of diversity. In their discussion, Keira and Jenny both used the word "inclusive" to describe diversity, however as evident in Table 2, most students used the word "different" as their primary descriptor for diversity.

Students described "formal" language as commonplace in the classroom.

We asked students to describe the ways they change their speaking for class, whether instructors use slang and other informal language in class, and how they respond to instructors' language practices. With these questions, we hoped to gauge how students described their languaging and what influenced it.

Ameya responded that their own language is "more formal" in class and that they "omit profanity completely." Ameya explained that this adaptation affects others' perceptions: "I'm a woman of color. I'm young. So, I have certain parts of my identity that might be considered less professional in a setting." For Farha, language shifts are socially necessary and automatic. In "friend groups," using "slang or little jokes" is a way to "get connected," and changing to "formal language" in class is easy: "I'm able to just blend in, adapt to the environment," Farha explained. For some students, this conscious shift to formal language is bound up in conformity or cultural responsibility. Haimi remarked that wearing a hijab is "putting out there that [they are] Muslim" and they need "to do what is expected." Giana described that, as "one of the only Black students in the classroom," they have felt "pressure" to represent "a whole race of people." It is important for us to note that not all participants described this same shift toward formal language. Keira noted that at a previous college, they conformed in their language practices "so [they] wouldn't face criticism." "[A]fter a year," explained Keira, "I made the conscious choice to just speak the way I usually speak."

Instructors may set the tone for classroom languaging. Brian "mirrors" instructors, crafting more "entertaining" presentations for "more informal professors." They

noted that when slang use is "genuine," it is also more engaging, and Farha feels "more invited to a conversation" when instructors use slang. Laily remarked that they were "able to learn better" in classes with instructors from minority backgrounds and recounted an experience with a professor who shared his Arabic background and dialect and often asked students about their dialects. However, students expressed maintaining their "formal" language in spite of instructors' demonstrations of linguistic variety.

Tensions in Talking About Languaging and Linguistic Diversity

These results reveal two problems for talking about languaging and linguistic diversity with students at our university. First, the results demonstrate the challenge of talking about race, racism, and judgment on the basis of language. While students do not directly address linguistic racism in their responses to focus group questions, language inequities are often in the background. Second, while students are able to talk about their language practices and characterize aspects of linguistic diversity, this awareness does not mean they see the academic context as a place for engaging linguistic diversity.

Misalignment between aspects of survey and focus group responses highlights areas of tension around talking about race, racism, and racial judgments. When asked, "do you feel like you're graded fairly?" survey participants responded largely affirmatively (n=31). Other experiences emerged in open survey comments and focus groups, including a survey participant's comment that they feel like they received better grades in online courses when they removed their picture from the class website and limited the chances for discrimination on the basis of skin color. However, overall in survey results, students were split on whether they felt their racial/ethnic identity impacted how others responded to their languaging. When we asked students whether they had been judged by instructors for their language, students in focus groups gave vague responses, presented second-hand accounts, or qualified their responses saying they have not felt this judgment at our university, suggesting that they may have elsewhere.

While most survey participants agreed that "bringing linguistic diversity into the classroom enhances their writing" (n=33), focus group participants generally implied a much different experience. Most focus group participants stated that they wrote "formally," or "in Standard American English," for classes, with no suggestion that their writing was positively affected by linguistic diversity. One exception is Keira, who detailed their journey to speaking "the way [they] usually speak" and to "unlearn anti-Blackness." While students' descriptions of diversity reflect our university's brand of having "the most diverse student body" in the state, most students' responses do not link language to this diversity.

Students' descriptions of using "formal" language in classrooms and "informal" language outside of classrooms reveal their expectation of adapting their language for various social, academic, and professional settings. This demonstrates how students accept code switching as integral in the "college language game" (Inoue, 2021). Baker-Bell (2020) explained this language performance in the context of an

urban secondary school, noting that, drawing from what they were socialized to believe about language, and not their "own attitudes and beliefs," some students made comments that simultaneously "resisted and perpetuated" anti-Blackness, something she described as "linguistic double-consciousness" (p. 49).

Direct Conversation about the College Language Game

Survey and focus group data revealed students' expectations for writing instruction and languaging at our diverse, urban research university. Like Baker-Bell's (2020) description of students who did not have "the precise language to name what they were experiencing" around linguistic racism, we noticed limits among participants, as they explained what they experienced, witnessed, or simply suspected. Reviewing survey and focus group responses, we observed that students have a tacit understanding of how ideologies about academic languaging manifest in practice but may be unable to express this knowledge explicitly. Furthermore, students may experience the pressure to gain recognition by languaging in particular, strategic ways, yet they might lack the ability to articulate such affiliations for themselves.

Students, particularly those of color, should not shoulder the burden of changing institutions that were built upon and perpetuate inequality. However, by centering students' voices in research settings, as we have done here, and in classroom discussions, faculty and other stakeholders can begin the work of moving resources toward the valuation of diverse language practices. To ensure linguistic diversity is supported in the academy, classroom work can center on students' and instructors' reflections on linguistic performances (Baker-Bell, 2020), on engaging students in critical resistance of too-often unexamined academic norms (Downs, 2020), on considering how assessment impacts students' language use (Slinkard & Gevers, 2020), and on directly confronting the deadly consequences of anti-Blackness (Okello & Stewart, 2021) while specifically centering Black Language and other marginalized linguistic traditions.

Since opening these conversations with students, we have identified contextually appropriate instructional possibilities for addressing linguistic diversity in writing classrooms at our university. Members of the team have worked with colleagues in our university's composition program to revise our first-year writing course to include students' reflection on their language use in different settings; additionally, instructors in that course have incorporated more purposeful dialogic feedback, in order to resist the internalized linguistic racism that often follows students throughout their school experiences (Baker-Bell, 2020; Macklin, 2016).

To be instructors who are on the same conversational page with our students about linguistic diversity, we can use familiar instructional strategies to support students' reflection on languaging across writing courses. To understand students' learning experiences related to languaging, we may use pre-assessment surveys to gauge prior knowledge and learning preferences, enabling us to tailor teaching strategies to student needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003). We might engage students in concept mapping, which visually organizes knowledge, to promote deeper learning about

languaging and linguistic diversity by encouraging students to link new information with existing concepts, enhancing critical thinking and comprehension (Kinchin, 2014). Dialogic activities, like student engagement with teacher feedback on writing, can support students in practicing critical discussions shaped by their scholarly reading (Yang & Carless, 2013). Such strategies emerge from our engagement with students in this study, though they are reflective of strategies outlined in scholarship cited throughout this article.

These discussions of the norms and expectations of the college languaging need to be extended beyond general education composition and communication classrooms, as students' languaging continues to take shape across higher education (Olivas, 2022). Structuring these conversations and the classroom work we do for and with students can help us begin to move into a university landscape that is diverse not only because of the presence of an array of peoples and languages, but also because of the richness of language and knowledge-making practices that emerge from students, instructors, and researchers working together.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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