Transforming Higher Education: Creating Linguistically Affirming Campus Environments

Simone A. Francis

Campus environments today are an amalgamation of students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As the number of linguistically diverse students in post-secondary education continues to rise, higher education institutions in the United States are challenged with, and responsible for, supporting their needs. However, linguistically diverse students, particularly students of color, learn early on that their academic environments are rooted in standard language ideology and that their variety of English and/or primary language is deemed inadequate and invaluable. This paper presents culturally relevant pedagogies and curriculum as opportunities for campus environments to enact change surrounding institutional culture and create spaces that validate and affirm students and their linguistic varieties.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, cultural relevance, standard language ideology

In 2016, the population of U.S. natives speaking a language other than English at home was approximately 21%, equating to more than 1 in 5 residents (ACS, 2017; Batalova & Zong, 2016). Today, the fastest growing subgroup of the overall student population are either born abroad or in the U.S. and speak a language other than English at home (de Kleine & Lawton, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the majority of these students are students of color who face challenges with both language and identity in campus environments. As the number of these students in postsecondary education continues to rise, U.S. higher education institutions are challenged with, and responsible for, supporting their needs.

Rather than taking an approach that highlights solely language itself, this paper focuses on recognizing the problematic nature of institutional culture surrounding language ideologies and examines how language and dialect intersect with minoritized racial identities. A focus is placed on the creation of culturally relevant environments and usage of culturally relevant pedagogy to increase sense of belonging for students of color and students of diverse linguistic backgrounds on campus. Woven through the text are reflections by the author that reflect their own personal background and encounters with linguistically diverse issues from different time periods in their life. The paper concludes with a call to action for faculty, administrators, and students in transforming their spaces and behaviors to be more linguistically inclusive in ways that affirm students of color, and in effect, positively impact all students.

Linguistic Diversity

Language is: the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a population of people; a form or manner of verbal expression (Language, n.d.). Language reflects shared histories, cultures, and the lived realities of people and their communities. On the other hand, dialect refers to a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties, constituting together a single language (Dialect, n.d.). In this text,
both language and dialect are considered in the discussion of linguistic backgrounds.

**Reflection One**

*Every time I hear someone speaking in Jamaican Patois*

I am immediately filled with internal joy.

No matter where in the world you go, you can likely find a Jamaican.

“Whaa gwaan? Mi de yah.”

...  

*I heard Kendrick Lamar’s Pride bumpin from my classroom... and I thought, “whoo! class finna be lit today”.*

...  

*I walked into my interview with freshly straightened hair and a mastered smile from years of experience and said... “Hey, how are you doing this morning? It’s great to meet you.”, in an octave higher than I entered the building with.*

...  

*My three varieties of English are worth celebration. They are extremely valuable.*

In the U.S. higher education context, linguistically diverse students vary in language and dialect backgrounds. Linguistically diverse students not only speak languages other than English at home, but are also students that speak U.S. based and overseas varieties of English. Utilizing de Kleine and Lawton’s (2015) categorizations as described in Table 1, this paper acknowledges and accounts for students with: English as a second language (ESL) background; an international and immigrant background; World English speaking background; and a non-mainstream English variety background. It is important to note the artificial nature of categorizing students, as each group can overlap with another and every student unable to fit neatly into one box.

**Table 1**

*Types of Linguistically Diverse Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Linguistically Diverse Students</th>
<th>Description of Students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English as a Second Language (ESL) Students</td>
<td>Students whose home language is not English and are in the process of developing English language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International and Immigrant Students</td>
<td>International students have finished secondary school in their home countries and are pursuing postsecondary education in the U.S. Immigrant students typically complete a portion of their K-12 education in the U.S. and reside here permanently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World English Speaking Students</td>
<td>Students that speak an overseas variety of</td>
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**English that is different from mainstream American English** (includes restructured or creolized varieties of English, i.e. students from India, Pakistan, Jamaica, Nigeria)

| U.S. Born Students of Non-mainstream Varieties | Students born in the U.S. that speak varieties of non-standard English (i.e. African-American/Black English, Appalachian English) |

**Note.** Adapted from “Meeting the Needs of Linguistically Diverse Students at the College Level” by C. de Kleine & R. Lawton. 2015.

It is useful to identify the different types of students being considered to problematize the image of what linguistic diversity typically looks like (de Kleine & Lawton, 2015). The description of students in Table 1 helps to illustrate some of the unique ways students from linguistically diverse backgrounds are connected to English. The needs of these students are different in their learning and mastery of standard English, but together they bring linguistic assets to the campus environment as a part of their cultural backgrounds. Linguistic diversity and the ways in which students experience language and communicate with others is inherently unique, but this does not negate the need for inclusion.

If we are to examine campus communities across the nation, we find the linguistic diversity checkbox marked complete with the portrayal of large enrollment numbers of international students, office swag with the word ‘hello’ printed in various languages, and requirements for foreign language courses to complete a degree. Institutions have begun to take into account numerous demographics when considering factors that influence college students’ experiences, but language is rarely explicitly cited as one of them (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). Instead, linguistic diversity is implied when culture is discussed, creating a dynamic that leaves language out of the conversation as efforts to increase sense of belonging among diverse student populations push forward. Sense of belonging, as explained by Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017), refers to various elements of a campus environment, such as campus climate and culture, that are associated with the extent to which students feel like they belong to their campus community. If students perceive campus culture surrounding language to value standard English as the most valued and valid form of communication, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are effectively silenced. The lack of recognition and affirmation for their linguistic assets contributes to an unreasonable expectation that students sever ties with their cultural communities in their college environment in order to successfully “fit in”, a factor that has been shown to diminish sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2017).

It is important to understand the ways in which language intersects with ethnic/racial identity. This critical piece gives room to acknowledge how institutional norms surrounding language are problematic and illustrates how students of color are negatively impacted in their need to assimilate as racial others and linguistic outsiders carrying non-dominant English varieties or undervalued mother tongues. A
shift in the way educators understand linguistic diversity can assist in transforming attitudes about languages and communication outside of standard English in academic spaces and begin centering dominant culture values. As we begin to understand how language and identity are intertwined, educators must recognize how language plays a role in fostering a sense of belonging amongst students of diverse backgrounds on campus.

Reflection Two

I guess my three language varieties fall into the world English and non-mainstream varieties of English categories... It’s interesting growing up speaking a language tied to an exoticized culture where all my life, being Jamaican is cool and sexy, but the language itself is broken and improper. I was always taught to speak “proper” English outside the house -- proper equating to how white people spoke. This was one of the essential things that I needed to excel in school and succeed in life.

The Campus Community Today

While campus educators attempt to recognize and increase awareness about the diversity of race, gender, religion, and other social identities in educational spaces, the diversity of language, if acknowledged, is often considered an issue that requires standardization and homogenization (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). In most U.S. colleges and universities today, students and faculty members of the dominant culture (i.e. White, middle- and upper-class communities) bring a form of privilege to campus: the standard language ideology, an ideology based upon a belief that there is a single, correct form of English that is spoken by educated individuals (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). Today this ideology has transformed into a culture that is ingrained into academia and is likely an unconscious condition the majority of members within the campus community fail to recognize.

Standard language ideology is widely accepted in the U.S. and the idea of having more than one acceptable variety of English is widely met with resistance. This culture is commonly reproduced on campus and in classrooms as preferred styles of communication align with specific members of the community. Lippi-Green (1997) described linguistic ideology as “a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class” (as cited in Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015, p. 782). Although not inherently discriminatory, the ways in which standard English is used to separate people and communities is inequitable.

bell hooks (1994) wrote, “I know it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (p. 168). Certain communities learn from everyday interactions that their variety of speech is less valuable and/or incorrect, resulting in the need to either adapt or face the possibility of being taken less seriously and considered less intelligent (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). Lamsal and Paudel (2012) argue that institutional culture forces non-traditional students to erase their language differences and learn the dominant variety of English as the way to pursue equal opportunities for success. It is convenient that this “equal opportunity” relies on centering white cultural values while devaluing and excluding those of minorities. Lamsal (2013) examined how complicit mainstream writing practices design
programs and policies that require assimilation rather than transformation by failing to recognize students’ marginalized experiences. Although referring most directly to English composition practices, Lamsal’s examination applies to institutional culture as a whole.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee (1974) passed a resolution in 1974 that addressed issues associating language with power, stating that “the language used by those in power in the community has an inherent advantage over other dialects as a means of expressing thought or emotion, conveying information, or analyzing concepts” (p. 2). The resolution read:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language, the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (p. 3)

Despite this resolution passing over 30 years ago and being reaffirmed in 2003, practices have not consistently aligned. Research suggests that educators may not have sufficient knowledge of language variation and its’ impacts on learning or simply may not value language varieties for educational purposes (de Kleine & Lawton, 2015).

**Reflection Three**

*When I heard Kendrick -- wow, it was lit. The majority of people in my class didn’t resonate the way I did, but that was okay. I appreciated my professor celebrating Kendrick, because the Black community had been doing the same. Since he racked up a Pulitzer Prize for his album DAMN, we were all here for it. The album examined social issues, Black pride, and the Black experience in the U.S. today. It was iconic, authentic, and a beautiful entryway into hip-hop for many. However, I knew that for the majority of professionals in academia the examination and usage of his poetic method of communication rooted in Black vernacular would be confined to ethnic, cultural, and hip-hop pedagogical studies. It was dope that my professor threw that perception away and felt liberated enough to play Kendrick’s music in class, using it to introduce the topic for the day -- counseling African-Americans.*

**Frameworks for Change**

Existing dominant theoretical perspectives about college success are limiting to efforts in expanding linguistic diversity on campus. Many frameworks do not adequately account for the cultural realities of students of color and contribute to inaccurate beliefs that cultural bias has no impact on their experiences. In result, critical educators and scholars are now calling for new theoretical frameworks and assessment instruments that can better
reflect the experiences of these students (Museus, 2014). Jill Dolan (2001) acknowledges the possibilities for such new perspectives by quoting Margaret Wilkerson in an article stressing the changing demography of American theatre, very much reflective of the changing demography of education. Wilkerson had suggested scholars rethink the Eurocentric history of their theory and practice if they wanted their programs to succeed in the twenty-first century (Dolan, 2011). These types of new frameworks, applicable to a variety of fields, allow scholars and students alike to look “elsewhere than the Eurocentric canon for knowledge” (Dolan, 2001, p. 71).

The CECE Model and Culturally Relevant Knowledge

One such framework is the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model (Museus, 2014). This model focuses on the degree to which a culturally engaging campus environment exists at an institution can be associated with success amongst racially diverse students. It posits that undergraduates attending institutions where they encounter culturally engaging campus environments are more likely to exhibit a greater sense of belonging, perform better, and persist to graduation. The model hypothesizes nine indicators of such environments that engage students of color, reflect their diverse needs, and facilitate their success (Museus, 2014).

Of these nine indicators, “Culturally Relevant Knowledge” is a key aspect to addressing both the success of students of color and linguistic inclusivity on campus. The culturally relevant knowledge indicator emphasizes that “the extent to which students have opportunities to create, maintain, and strengthen epistemological connections to their home communities through spaces that allow them to acquire knowledge about their communities of origin is associated with increased likelihood of success” (Museus, 2014, p. 210). Museus (2014) uses White, low-income students as an example, where receiving opportunities to learn about class inequalities and oppression might assist them in the development of epistemological cultural connections. For students of color, these connections typically occur with involvement in ethnic studies courses, on-campus cultural centers, and student organizations (Museus, 2014).

With these examples in mind, a few questions arise: Why should these spaces be the only vehicles to foster such epistemological connection for students of color? What role do faculty and classroom spaces play? Considering many students of color on campuses identify with language or dialect backgrounds distinct from standard English, the classroom space should be an accessible vehicle since it is the most utilized space for intentional learning. Frameworks such as CECE push for classrooms and social justice education to be a site for social change, and they are not only useful to reframe student success amongst students of color but to also create an avenue to consider how linguistic diversity contributes to their experiences.

CECE also supports the creation of culturally relevant environments outside of traditional classroom spaces. Student affairs practitioners co-construct learning with students, and opportunities to create, maintain, and sustain epistemological connections to home communities can extend beyond the physical classroom environments. In that sense, the question becomes what roles do administrators also hold in mobilizing culturally relevant knowledge? Research suggests that students of color who have opportunities to learn and share knowledge about the needs of and issues within their own communities of origin are more likely to have stronger
connections to their respective institutions (Museus, 2014). Considering the ways in which language directly associates with culture and is closely tied with racialized experiences for students of color, it is our responsibility as institutional bodies to also create environments outside of the classroom that validate linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The CECE Model is intentionally connected here with the Ladson-Billings (1994) framework for culturally relevant pedagogy that, “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (as cited in Aroson & Laughter, 2016, p. 165). Cultural competence as a component of this pedagogy focuses on helping students recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices, while acquiring the skills and knowledge to also navigate the dominant culture and succeed in a school that oppresses them (Aroson & Laughter, 2016). Importantly, both frameworks emphasize the need for students to learn, understand, and utilize knowledge about the dominant culture, but they also consider it equally as important for students to have supplementary classroom experiences that validate their cultural histories and backgrounds.

The same can be said for creating linguistically diverse campus environments. There is no argument to support abandoning standard English or placing less emphasis on its importance in the academy. Higher education is a microcosm of the society at large and English is global. There is also no denying the importance of a common language amongst a group of people – particularly English, which is not only global but also uniquely valuable in professional environments, commerce, and education. However, does this mean there is no space to value, uplift, and celebrate the myriad of other languages and dialects that campus community members bring with them as part of their personal and cultural identities? Educators committed to fostering inclusive communities on campus would certainly agree that there is plenty of room.

Reflection Four

The way I exude professionalism is not only reliant on language; it is intertwined with my identity. When I change the octave of my voice, it is to appear less angry or frustrated with the world - cause that’s what Black women are, right? This is similar to when I straighten my hair or determine that I should not wear a headwrap on a particular day. It is because I perceive an organization, community, or person to be less open about Blackness and the significance behind the ways I present myself.

I will never reveal being Jamaican in a formal environment because my answer to say something in “Jamaican” will always be no. Don’t get me wrong, I value my education and the opportunities it has afforded me, especially in being able to navigate the world in the way that it exists. Such navigation puts me into the educated Black woman category, also known as, ‘the exception.’ But I also wish my classroom environments from K-12 and as an undergrad student were less stifling. There was so much potential for learning while incorporating my cultural background and dialects. I remember translating a poem I wrote about Alan Paton’s Cry the Beloved Country into Italian for an oral presentation -- and that was extremely rewarding. Who would’ve thought using a text about South Africa, apartheid, and racism would help me learn Italian?

Changing the Culture
Language and identity are inextricably tied, and to reject a person’s language is to reject that person and their culture (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). If the campus environment is not actively promoting and celebrating community languages and dialects outside of foreign language courses and designated “culture days,” it is being complicit in allowing standard language ideology to shape the culture of the institution and effectively silencing and devaluing students of color. Culturally relevant knowledge and culturally relevant pedagogy are transformative ideologies that can assist campus community members in reshaping the way linguistic diversity is celebrated, contributing to an expansion of how students of color are included in the environment. It is the author’s hope that the personal reflections shared in this paper help to demonstrate the ways in which such culture can be harmful, and to illustrate the benefits of feeling welcome in learning environments in ways that are linguistically inclusive. The following suggestions outline possibilities for campus community members as a whole, and faculty, administrators, and students as distinct bodies, to begin a process of transforming their campus culture through dialogue, representation, and affirmation.

All Campus Community Members
1. Consider how you connected with the author’s reflections. What questions do you have about the author because of the reflections? What assumptions have you made? Have you thought about your linguistic background in relation to the varieties of language you use, the way you interact with language in learning environments, and how language is tied to who you are?
2. Reflect on your personal linguistic background, how this impacts your identity, and what biases you may hold towards other linguistic varieties than your own. Consider how this may impact other campus community members from diverse backgrounds.
3. Consider the expectations you hold for others in relation to their speech. Have you ever contributed to creating an environment that may feel exclusive?
4. Encourage colleagues to talk about linguistic diversity—it all starts with a conversation.
5. Challenge campus community members that display problematic behaviors and attitudes towards different language/dialect backgrounds.

Faculty
1. Consider how your linguistic background may connect, or disconnect, with the students you teach who hold minoritized identities. What are ways you can create a classroom experience that validates different languages and dialects?
2. Include conversations on diverse linguistic backgrounds in classes and question what expectations exist in the space about language. For example, what is a good presentation? What does it mean to be clear/understood? If you utilize social justice paradigms to initiate community building, how can this incorporate language? Do safe or brave spaces include an openness to various styles of communication?
3. Transform curricula and program agendas to include media and texts from diverse and multilingual contributors (i.e. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) Borderlands/La Frontera).
Don’t shy away from using media in other languages—subtitles exist for a reason, and they do not need to be an exception.

4. Acknowledge the histories of words sometimes… this does not have to be all the time, but this can help students understand the context and history of certain words and phrases. Comprehension is not lost by doing this.

5. Incorporate low-stakes assignments in classes that allow students to communicate concepts in the communicative style they see fit. Use these low-stakes assignments to help students transform their research/projects into meaningful work that reflects who they are, their backgrounds, and their communities.

6. Make projects and services relevant—construct assignments in a way that can be utilized outside of academic boundaries. For example, how can you assist students to think about how their project could be transferrable to their home community?

Administrators
1. Consider how your linguistic background may connect, or disconnect, with the students you interact with and serve who hold minoritized identities. What are ways you can create a programming experience that validates different languages and dialects?

2. If you incorporate social justice frameworks into programming, include conversations on diverse linguistic backgrounds and question what expectations exist in the space about language. When setting group norms or guidelines, is language considered? Do safe and/or brave spaces include an openness to various styles of communication?

3. How are the engagement opportunities offered by your office inclusive of diverse linguistic backgrounds? What media, arts, and cultural artifacts are used to expand the narrative surrounding language? Use subtitles, translations, and discussions to prompt exploration.

4. If you are responsible for policy and conduct related issues on campus, how can you make documents and expectations more accessible? Many policies are written in a way that is not easily understood by administrators themselves, but students are still expected to adhere to them. Are there possibilities for more effective communication methods that will resonate with students?

5. Promote the value of linguistic diversity. Many people will say that speaking a variety of languages is beneficial for global interconnectedness and career prospects. What does this mean in practice? How are students learning what multilingual success looks like?

6. Be innovative! An international student services office can facilitate opportunities for students to translate their experiences on campus/in the classroom into their native languages to bridge community gaps. Why not use what students are already creating?

Students
1. Reflect on your personal linguistic background, how this impacts your identity, and what biases you may hold towards other linguistic varieties. Consider how this may impact your peers and fellow
students, and the ways in which they feel comfortable sharing and communicating with others.

2. Bring your cultural histories into the classroom and check your fear at the door. It may take some time for people to appreciate your perspectives, but this leaves space for you to feel validated and may validate others as well. Your background, presence, and experiences make the environment much more interesting—own it.

3. Read texts from your cultural background and connect them to what you are learning. International and immigrant students—bring in ways of learning and knowing that you are familiar with. U.S. students—your community may not have access to this elite space, but that does not make them void of knowledge. All linguistically diverse students should learn about academic scholarship and projects that help to incorporate home community’s lived experiences and communication styles, even if classes have not prompted doing so.

4. Master standard English. There is no argument against its importance and usage to create opportunities for success. However, also take the time to value, uplift, and celebrate your own language, dialect, and culture.

5. As you enter the professional workforce, you will play a role in shaping the culture. Understanding why linguistic diversity is valuable to all spaces and how it contributes to equitable practices will help you transform your work environments in the future.

Concluding Remarks

These suggestions are not a finite list, and the information presented here is by no means all-encompassing. It is clear that a critical lens used in the promotion and celebration of linguistic diversity in higher education has not been at the forefront of social justice issues, therefore the lack of information, research, and data is limiting. However, the lack of focus on this issue does not erase the reality that there is much work to be done. The author has used review of literature, select theoretical frameworks, and personal reflections to present an argument that supports the need for language consideration as an important part of creating more inclusive campus environments. The personal reflections present an opportunity for readers to consider how their own linguistic backgrounds reflect their personal comfort with varieties of language, the ways in which they interact with language in learning environments, and the ways language has been tied to their identities and who they are. Linguistic diversity is integral to advancing diversity initiatives dedicated to increasing sense of belonging among students of color in a more holistic way that validates and affirms cultural background. Campus community members must begin transforming campus environments to reflect the changing demographics in postsecondary education institutions and move beyond the surface-level promotion of language to create change.

Simone is a recent graduate of Indiana University’s Higher Education & Student Affairs program and a New York University alumna. Her work is dedicated to advancing initiatives that promote equitable environments for students of color in higher education, and she aims to develop sustainable community-based arts partnerships to advance pedagogical practices.
References


