

**Grammar Autoethnography:
Training Students to Reflect on “Intergrammatical” Competence**

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1. Introduction

English composition instructors face the dilemma of needing to teach the norms of standard academic English while also promoting a democratic appreciation for linguistic diversity. Prescriptive grammar education is often felt as threatening to students’ identities, while research shows that much grammar instruction fails to make any impact. In response to these issues, this paper theorizes culturally responsive pedagogical approaches for legitimizing students’ diverse linguistic identities and personalizing grammar instruction. Teachers can create such an environment for grammar instruction by developing activities that synthesize two research methods: contrastive analysis and critical autoethnography. Contrastive analysis in the classroom involves helping students to identify the unique characteristics of various language forms, including the forms students use themselves (Gay 97-101). Classroom applications of autoethnography involve helping students to reflect critically upon their own identities and feelings of affiliation or non-affiliation toward various cultural groups (Kumaravadivelu 184-85). This paper proposes a series of grammar autoethnography assignments for use in developmental writing courses to promote personalized grammar instruction, metalinguistic awareness of “intergrammatical” competence, and a stronger sense of linguistic identity for students who face marginalization.

2. Dual Theoretical Problem and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Many researchers such as Geneva Smitherman, Carol Lee, and Geneva Gay have long established that a negative attitude toward students’ language is harmful both to their identities

and to their academic performance (Gay 81). In academic settings, however, it is difficult to avoid the dichotomy between Standard and forms of nonstandard English, even though Standard English is not as monolithically homogeneous as once thought (Gay 82). It is likewise difficult to find a neutral term for the concept of “nonstandard” dialects, and the term “first language interference” has a distinctly negative connotation. How can teachers help students explore the norms of academic English without denigrating other forms of English as, in the words of Geneva Gay, “deficient, nonstandard, obstructive, dysfunctional, even nonexistent” (81)?

A second major issue for teachers is that grammar instruction simply might not work. Much to teachers’ dismay, many studies show that formal instruction in grammar will make little impact on a student’s ability to produce grammatical academic English (Hartwell 319, 322; Selinger 359-369). Patrick Hartwell points out that teachers tend to have a “hyperliterate perception of the value of formal rules,” when in fact language production is largely an unconscious process (319, 322).¹ Martha Kolln, who defines grammar as “the internalized system that native speakers of a language share,” has argued for helping students to “understand the system they know unconsciously as native speakers” (Kolln 140, 150; Hartwell 306). In a diverse classroom, however, students’ internal grammars include a variety of rule-governed dialects as well as forms of ESL “interlanguage,” which Larry Selinker and Ilona Leki have demonstrated to be “systematic and rule-governed” (Selinker 209-231, Leki 331).² In today’s

¹ Note: as this was a conference paper, please excuse the non-standard format of the footnotes. Patrick Hartwell, “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.” *College English* 47 (1985): 105-27. Reprinted in Glenn’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*, 305-29. (The page numbers cited are from *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*.)

² Ilona Leki, “Meaning and Developing of Academic Literacy in a Second Language.” Reprinted in Glenn’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*, 330-42. (The page numbers cited are from *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*.)

composition classroom, a large portion of students are expected to internalize grammatical concepts that differ significantly from their own unconscious rule-governed grammars.

Teachers therefore need to develop culturally responsive methods for developing students' metalinguistic awareness about their own and others' internalized grammar systems. Geneva Gay delineates culturally responsive pedagogy as using students' own cultural resources as scaffolding to introduce curricular content, thus strengthening students' cultural identities (97-101). Activities that employ contrastive analysis and critical autoethnography have the potential to draw upon students' diverse backgrounds to help them gain metalinguistic awareness about themselves and others. Research on critical pedagogy has demonstrated the effectiveness of contrastive analysis and autoethnography, but there needs to be more discussion on how to combine these techniques specifically for grammar instruction.

3. Definition of Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis is a method from applied linguistics for tracking the differences between languages, dialects, and even rhetorical registers. Geneva Gay cites several successful applications of contrastive analysis for teaching grammar to African American students in high school and college environments (97-101). For teaching literary concepts, Carol Lee successfully used contrastive analysis first to build upon African American students' familiarity with the trope of *signifying*, and then to introduce many other kinds of figurative language (Gay 100-101). Contrastive analysis activities can also be modified for heterogeneous groups of students, including native English speakers and ESL students, to enhance their metalinguistic awareness.

4. Definition of Autoethnography

While contrastive analysis can catalyze understanding of new linguistic concepts, autoethnography provides a critical opportunity for marginalized groups to rewrite "Otherizing

narratives” that misrepresent their experiences (Kumaravadivelu 185). In *Cultural Globalization and Language Education*, Bala Kumaravadivelu defines autoethnography as “an analytical account of one’s cultural self. It is a critical review of one’s sense of affiliation to, or differentiation from, a group or culture” (184-185). Critical autoethnography gives students the opportunity to explain their unique perspectives and to reflect upon the historical and socio-cultural factors that have shaped their own internalized systems of grammar.

5. Description of the Unit on Contrastive Analysis and Autoethnography

I would therefore like to present an entire grammar unit comprised of activities that combine contrastive analysis with critical autoethnography in order to engage students in developmental writing courses. To set a positive tone early in the unit, students will read essays that challenge linguistic hegemony, such as Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue” or even bell hooks’ chapter in *Teaching to Transgress*, entitled “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words,” which celebrates the evolution of African American dialects. This proposed unit overall contains about seven interdependent stages.

Gathering data about oneself

In the first stage, students will gather data about themselves, first by writing reflective journals about experiences that posed challenges to their linguistic identities. They will also take a diagnostic grammar test to be analyzed by the instructor. Next, they will begin research on the most common differences between Standard academic English and the grammars of their own subcultural, dialectical, or first language contexts. For U.S. students, the website associated with the PBS special “Do you speak American?” is a perfect starting point, providing videos and short articles on American dialects (<http://www.pbs.org/speak/articles/>). Second language learners would benefit from reading short articles about the main differences between English and their

native languages, such as those posted on the ESL department website for the Frankfurt International School (<http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/>). Researching articles related to students' linguistic backgrounds thus introduces them to contrastive analysis.

Conference with teacher

The second stage is to schedule student-teacher conferences, where each student will share their journals and their research. The instructor and the students will discuss the historical and socio-cultural explanations for why their internal grammars might differ from the grammar of Standard academic English. In light of each student's performance on the grammar diagnostic, the instructor will help students to identify personal learning goals for grammar acquisition. The instructor will then provide resources on relevant grammatical terms, such as parts of speech, tense, articles, and other concepts necessary for performing contrastive analysis.

Assignment 1: Self-reflective Annotated Bibliography

These conferences will also prepare students for their next assignment, which is a brief annotated bibliography containing students' reflections on the language articles they have been reading. During their research, students will also identify five to ten main grammatical differences between Standard English and their own dialects or native languages.

Assignment 2: Composing Texts for Contrastive Analysis

In the next assignment, students will exemplify these differences by composing a brief text with two versions: one written in one's native dialect or language, and the other written in Standard academic English. A Korean student would write the first version in Korean, while an African American student could write the first text in African American vernacular English. The instructor can aid in editing the Standard English versions. Then students will annotate the

grammatical differences they want to demonstrate, and thus they will practice contrastive analysis on the texts they have generated themselves.

Second Conference with instructor

Students will then have a second conference about the autoethnographic research process thus far, and the teacher will provide feedback on the first two assignments concerning the grammatical features students have been contrasting. The instructor will also provide guidance for the next assignment, a research paper.

Assignment 3: Autoethnographic Research Paper on One's Inner Grammatical Self

This autoethnographic research paper is similar to a literacy narrative, but it will specifically incorporate what students have learned about themselves through performing contrastive analysis activities and researching their own cultural backgrounds. In the essay, students will give textual examples of the main differences they noticed between their own internalized linguistic systems and Standard English, and they will explain the socio-cultural or historical reasons behind those differences.

Assignment 4: Oral Presentation

At the end of the unit, students will present their findings to the class using multimedia presentations, in which they will share significant experiences in the development of their linguistic identities. In addition, students will share their examples of contrastive analysis and thus enhance their classmates' awareness of the diversity of linguistic systems.

6. Benefits due to personalized material

One of the main benefits of this grammar autoethnography unit is the usage of diagnostic tools and conferences to design individualized learning goals. Since there is such a huge degree of variation in the internal grammars of today's students, it can be hard to develop a grammar

curriculum that suits all needs in the classroom. During the earlier stages of this unit, however, the students and the instructor collaborate to set personalized goals, leading to more student agency in the research process.

7. Benefits for promoting metalinguistic self-awareness

Another benefit is that through conducting contrastive analysis and autoethnography, students will gain metalinguistic awareness of their own developing intergrammatical competence that they bring into the classroom. I define intergrammatical competence as the ability to notice grammatical differences in the speech and writing of people from different backgrounds and to control one's own production of grammar to match what is expected depending on the situation. Intergrammatical competence is similar to code-switching and bidialectism, but intergrammatical competence is broader because it involves awareness of multiple grammars, including global rule-governed dialects and ESL interlanguage forms which are part of the normal process of second language acquisition. Just as African American students can usually perform code-switching without formal instruction, students of all backgrounds most likely exhibit some degree of intergrammatical competence, but there is always room for growth. Through contrastive analysis activities supported by instructor feedback, students will gain a vocabulary for explaining why their own language usage is different from other modes, and this form of metalinguistic awareness has the potential to facilitate the acquisition of Standard English grammar.

Benefits for marginalized students

Discovering the basis for their own linguistic competence will ultimately strengthen students' cultural identities, especially for marginalized students. Intergrammatical competence means understanding that there are always socio-cultural and historical reasons for linguistic

variation, and such a perspective would be incompatible with the view that some languages are superior to others. Through contrastive analysis activities, even students who self-identify as speakers of Standard English can come to notice the gap between academic writing and their own oral, digital, or subcultural forms of English. All students will recognize that their unique internal grammars are a valuable part of their cultural identities, and thus they can resolve negative feelings they may feel about the hegemony of grammatical “correctness.”

Conclusion

Combining contrastive analysis of grammar systems with critical autoethnography is overall a practical method for training students to appreciate both their own and others’ linguistic diversity in an increasingly globalized world. One area for further experimental research is to develop psychometrics for metalinguistic awareness and to measure correlations between metalinguistic awareness and the ability to produce syntax that follows the grammatical norms of target linguistic systems. Although the efficacy of this grammar autoethnography unit has not been experimentally confirmed, these activities should prevent the erasure of linguistic diversity by encouraging students to study and cultivate their inherited systems of grammar. Perhaps comma splices and dangling modifiers are simply part of a student’s internal grammar, representing a distinct form of associative linguistic consciousness. Combining contrastive analysis with autoethnography promises to be engaging and enlightening both for students and instructors, and most importantly it would celebrate the centrality of students’ diverse linguistic identities in the classroom.

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