



A Framework for Raciolinguistically Just Literacy Instruction

Jeanine L. Williams, PhD

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RETHINK. REIMAGINE. REDESIGN.



Introduction

For decades now, there has been a call for increased linguistic and cultural diversity in postsecondary literacy instruction. This call dates back as far as 1974 when the Conference on College Composition and Communication first adopted a statement affirming 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." In the time since Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) was adopted, it has been widely discussed, debated, revised, and refined. Yet, the ways in which we teach and practice writing in academic spaces in no way fully reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of our students. During his keynote address at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Asao Inoue explained that "we tell our students how much right they have to their languages, how much we care and embrace the diversity of languages that they bring and use, yet we tacitly contradict these messages by asking them to wait just a bit longer for us to feel comfortable enough to change our classroom practices, to change the way standards work against them, despite the linguistic truths we know about the communicative effectiveness of all languages." While theory, research, and conscience urge us otherwise, the disconnect between good intentions and our curricular, pedagogical, and assessment practices persists.

As the sociopolitical landscape of the U.S. continues to reveal the deeply rooted injustice against people of color and the prominence of white supremacy, within postsecondary literacy a more gradual movement towards linguistically and culturally informed instruction has been replaced with a demand for raciolinguistic justice *now* (CCCC, 2020). Highlighting the ways in which linguistic injustice shows up in postsecondary literacy instruction, Inoue (2019) states, "among many other injustices, I add to this list the way we judge, assess, give feedback to, and grade writing by students of color in our classrooms. Yes, the ways we judge language form some of the steel bars around our students and ourselves -- we too maintain White supremacy, even as we fight against it in other ways." At the heart of this demand for linguistic justice is a shift away from white language supremacy, where students are essentially required to

shed their rich, powerful, and meaningful ways of communicating and to conform to so-called “standard English”. The demand for raciolinguistic justice has no patience for teaching practices that appear to respect all students’ right to their own language (like code-switching), but ultimately hold all students to a standard that privileges certain ways of communicating and puts others in the margins—in other words, a white language supremacist standard. Instead, the demand for raciolinguistic justice unequivocally requires that students be taught from a critical language awareness paradigm, where they learn about the diversity of language and how to navigate and challenge the politics of language as writers (see CCCC Demand for Black Linguistic Justice, 2020). The ultimate goal is for students to develop the dexterity necessary for them to make intentional rhetorical choices where they assertively, confidently, and without judgement employ the full range of their linguistic repertoires.

While many postsecondary literacy educators embrace the goal of raciolinguistic justice, they express feeling ill-equipped to translate it into meaningful and effective practice. In fact, over the past year, professional conferences and events in the field of composition and rhetoric have seen an explosion of conversations in which teachers gather with a shared goal of linguistic justice and then proceed to express confusion, frustration, and naïveté about to put it effectively into practice with students. As a result, their curricular, pedagogical, and assessment structures do not fully reflect their commitment to linguistic justice. Meanwhile, all students continue to be subjected to postsecondary literacy instruction that ignores and delegitimizes their linguistic realities and needs. Much worse, students of color in particular continue to suffer the violence and injustice that is ever present in postsecondary literacy instruction from the requirement of “standard English”, to glorification of linear thinking as “clear” thinking, down to course materials that reinforce the invisibility of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Young, 2020). The problems are deep and painful, but the good news is it doesn’t have to be this way. There is a way forward towards postsecondary literacy instruction that is raciolinguistically just.

From Ideology to Practice

The journey toward equitable and just literacy instruction, raciolinguistically or otherwise, begins with critical self-reflection and a commitment to ongoing reflexivity. As postsecondary literacy professionals, we must be willing to acknowledge that we too are products of an intentionally and persistently unjust educational system and society and that our ideas, teaching, and practice of literacy are tainted by our own experiences as students within this violent system. We must be willing to continually reflect on our linguistic ideologies and how they shape and are shaped by our racialized experiences within and outside of academia. It is only from this point of awareness and acknowledgement that we can start the process of unlearning and decolonization that will free us to reimagine and redesign these systems and ultimately our work with students. Most importantly, it is from a disposition of perpetual reflexivity that we can sustain our work towards equitable and just postsecondary literacy instruction.

Equity and justice, particularly raciolinguistic justice, continue to be at the forefront of my reflexive practice and my work as a practitioner-scholar-activist in postsecondary literacy and learning. Over the past several months I have been working to answer three questions:

- ⇒ *What does raciolinguistically just postsecondary literacy look like on a practical level?*
- ⇒ *How do we make our ideologies on raciolinguistic justice actionable in the classroom?*
- ⇒ *How might we redesign instruction to prepare students for the current state of postsecondary literacy, while also working toward more equitable and just literacy ideologies and practices?*

Through my own critical and reflexive practice, I have developed a framework that answers these questions and that provides a roadmap for enacting raciolinguistic justice in our classrooms. I would like to acknowledge that parts of this framework were

developed through a collaborative effort to implement labor-based grading with writing program colleagues at my institution. Through this collaboration, ideas related to the reframing of grammar instruction, the relationship between grades and instructor feedback, and the specific reflection questions that students answer were developed.

The framework for raciolinguistically just literacy instruction that follows allows instructors to break free from the current state of postsecondary literacy instruction where they are trapped by “the language of power” and the obligation to teach and hold students to its standards. This framework addresses the needs of both faculty and students and reimagines postsecondary literacy instruction to be equitable, just, and full of joy--making the goal of raciolinguistic justice accessible and actionable. Thus, freeing students and teachers to navigate diverse linguistic spaces with confidence and authenticity.

A Framework for Raciolinguistically Just Literacy Instruction

Raciolinguistically just postsecondary literacy instruction acknowledges and respects the humanity and birthright of all participants and allows them both ownership over and agency within their literacy practices. Such literacy instruction realizes that in addition to the goals and objectives set by the instructor for any given assignment, each student has their own goals and objectives for their work. These goals and objectives are reflective of the students’ linguistic, cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. These goals and objectives add meaning and richness to the students’ work and they influence the way a student approaches an assignment—including the ways in which the student chooses to use language to convey meaning. Postsecondary literacy instruction that is raciolinguistically just not only acknowledges the students’ right to own and exercise agency over their literacy practices, it is designed to facilitate students’ ownership and agency. Raciolinguistically just literacy instruction is a joint venture between professionals and students where they are both teachers and learners of language and literacy. In this joint venture, faculty and students work together towards

three goals: (1) to build their critical language awareness, (2) to hone their capacity for exercising linguistic dexterity, and (3) to justly assess students' work.

Goal #1: Building Critical Language Awareness

To build the critical language awareness necessary to successfully navigate diverse linguistic spaces, faculty and students should engage in a series of readings that explore the complex interplay between language, literacy, and culture, and the power and politics of language and literacy. Next, faculty and students should explore the concept of linguistic dexterity by examining a variety of linguistic/rhetorical traditions such as Black/African Diasporic, Latinx, Chicano/a, Indigenous, and Appalachian. The specific traditions studied should also be reflective of the linguistic backgrounds of the students and faculty in the classroom. Along with this, students and faculty should consider and share the characteristics of their own linguistic traditions. Guided through a comparative analysis, students and faculty should explore the cultural, historical, social, and political dimensions of these various linguistic/rhetorical traditions. It is important that “academic English” is included in this exploration as yet another linguistic tradition that reflects particular cultural, historical, social, and political assumptions.

In raciolinguistically just literacy instruction—building critical language awareness and honing linguistic dexterity—it is imperative to redefine the ways in which grammar is taught and practiced. Even within conversations about language diversity, grammar is often presented as a fixed set of rules that are universal and common across linguistic traditions. What is considered and taught as grammar is based solely on white language habits and “standard English,” when in reality, one of the distinguishing features of diverse linguistic traditions is their use of punctuation, word choice, and how sentences are structured to construct and convey ideas. Moreover, even while all linguistic traditions have their own rules for grammar, these rules are often purposefully “broken” by individuals who want to use language in ways that are more creative and more aligned with their communicative aims. Raciolinguistically just literacy instruction views grammar not as a set of fixed rules, but as intentional choices made by students to

convey both style and meaning. In other words, students have both ownership and agency in their language choices—including choosing to codemesh.

Goal #2: Honing Linguistic Dexterity

With a solid foundation of critical language awareness, faculty and students can more fully exercise their linguistic dexterity. Linguistic dexterity is the ability to leverage critical language awareness to assess and skillfully navigate diverse linguistic spaces. It focuses on intentionality and authenticity in the communicative or linguistic approach. Moreover, it supports the freedom to utilize the entirety of our linguistic milieus and repertoires—aware of and able to withstand white language supremacy. To facilitate students' linguistic dexterity, and ultimately their ability to effectively and confidently codemesh, postsecondary literacy instruction must be rethought, reimagined and redesigned to support these aims. This includes presenting students with different writing/communicative contexts, a reflective/metacognitive element where students examine their various linguistic avenues and make intentional linguistic/rhetorical choices to most effectively achieve their goals for writing, and critical consideration of the “pitfalls” of particular linguistic/rhetorical choices and how they might be mitigated while still remaining true to the writer's purpose. The ultimate goal is to understand how to circumvent or counter white language supremacist responses to diverse linguistic/rhetorical approaches, as opposed to simply reverting back to “standard edited English” as the only acceptable or effective approach to writing in academic spaces.

To this end, I have developed a **five-step reflective process** for students to engage with and demonstrate their linguistic dexterity.

Step 1: Students Define their Audience

In this step, students answer questions including:

- ⇒ *Who is my audience?*
- ⇒ *What is the specific rhetorical context?*
- ⇒ *How does my audience identify linguistically and culturally?*

- ⇒ *Given who my audience is linguistically and culturally, and the rhetorical context, what are the expectations for communication?*

Step 2: Students Define Who They are in Respect to Audience and Rhetorical Context

In this step, students answer questions such as:

- ⇒ *What is my relationship to the audience?*
- ⇒ *What is my position in this specific rhetorical context?*
- ⇒ *How do I identify linguistically and culturally?*
- ⇒ *Given who I am linguistically and culturally, and the rhetorical context, what are my goals and expectations for communication?*

Step 3: Students Consider their Linguistic and Rhetorical Options

The third step is for students to consider their linguistic and rhetorical options for presenting their ideas, given their audience, the rhetorical context, and how they identify linguistically and culturally. In particular, students draw upon their linguistic backgrounds to identify their communicative options, along with the pros and cons of each option. This step is also a space for students to apply their knowledge of race and cultural context to the decisions they make about their language use—answering questions such as:

- ⇒ *What are my options for communicating with my intended audience?*
- ⇒ *How does each option impact my ability to reach my audience?*
- ⇒ *What are the pros and cons of each option in terms of my ability to reach my audience?*

Step 4: Students Select and Assert their Linguistic/Rhetorical Approach

In the fourth step, students select and celebrate their sense of ownership and intentionality related to their language use. In this step, students pay attention to questions like:

- ⇒ *What linguistic and rhetorical approach do I feel is most appropriate and why?*
- ⇒ *What are the potential drawbacks given my audience, the rhetorical context, and how I you identify linguistically and culturally?*
- ⇒ *How will I mitigate the drawbacks so that my message is well received?*

Step 5: Students Determine the Most Appropriate Support and Sources for their Writing

The final step involves answering questions such as:

- ⇒ *What types of support/sources would most appeal to my audience and why?*
- ⇒ *What types of support/sources are most aligned with my linguistic/rhetorical approach?*
- ⇒ *How might I incorporate support/sources that stretch my audience?*
- ⇒ *How might I make them accessible to my audience?*

By engaging in this process, students can leverage the entirety of their linguistic repertoires to make intentional, nuanced, and complex language choices, without simply submitting to white language supremacy. Encouraging students' use and development of their linguistic dexterity must necessarily be accompanied by assessment practices that honor students' intentional language choices rather than continuing to hold them to white supremacist standards.

Goal #3: Justly Assessing Student Writing

Assessment within raciolinguistically just literacy instruction, again, reflects the humanity and birthright of all participants and respects and facilitates students' ownership over and agency within their literacy practices, which includes student-determined goals and objectives. Thus, assessment takes equally into account how well the student meets the goals and objectives set by the instructor and goals and objectives set by the students themselves. Furthermore, students are free to use language in ways that best align with their goals, objectives, and chosen linguistic approach. Thus, assessing grammar becomes focused on whether the students' language choices demonstrate a consistent, purposeful, and goal-aligned writing style, along with whether the students' language choices facilitate readability and understanding of their ideas. To accomplish this, raciolinguistically just assessment is about transparency, community, and conversation—not about gatekeeping and upholding white supremacist language standards.

Shifting away from traditional writing assessment that is linguistically inequitable and unjust, assessment should be focused on the students' linguistic awareness and dexterity as opposed to what white language habits deem "right or correct." Assessing writing within this framework centers the linguistic and rhetorical thinking in which the students engage and considers how well the students consider the possible linguistic and rhetorical approaches to the writing/communicative context, how well the students justify their linguistic/rhetorical choices, how well the students consider the "pitfalls" of their choices, how effectively the students circumvent/counter these "pitfalls," and how effectively the students remain true to their linguistic/rhetorical approach. Aligned with a labor-based grading framework, the students' grades are determined by the extent to which they adhered to the instructor-set assignment guidelines and the extent to which they met their self-determined goals and objectives. Moreover, feedback on the students' work is driven by not only the instructor-set assignment guidelines but also the students' personal goals for the assignment, their intentions for language use, and their own assessments of the strengths and weaknesses within their work.

To facilitate a transparent, community-oriented, and conversational assessment process, students provide insight on their linguistic and rhetorical thinking by submitting brief responses to the following four reflective questions for each assignment:

- ⇒ *Aside from simply meeting the requirements, what were your personal goals for this assignment?*
- ⇒ *When reviewing your language choices, what choices did you make to approach your goals for staying within or moving beyond conventions for academic writing?*
- ⇒ *What parts of your work on this assignment are you most proud of?*
- ⇒ *What challenged you in this assignment and/or where do you need additional support from your instructor?*

Instructors use this information to provide students with suggestions for improving their work to better align with both the instructor-set assignment guidelines, and more importantly, the students' own goals and objectives. After receiving feedback, students have an opportunity to revise and resubmit their work to earn points for "additional

labor.” Students maintain and assert their ownership of their work by submitting response to the following revision reflection questions:

- ⇒ *Which areas of feedback did you choose to address in your revised version and why?*
- ⇒ *How did you address this feedback in your revised version?*
- ⇒ *Which areas of feedback did you choose not to address in your revised version and why?*

In this assessment process, student grades are divorced from instructor feedback—meaning that students are graded based on their labor or the good faith effort they expend to meet both the instructor-given and their self-determined goals and objectives for the assignment, not on whether they “fix” their work to appease the instructor’s thoughts, opinions and standards.

Justly assessing students’ writing, or the writing of any author, that does not conform to traditional notions of academic English requires intentional, mindful, and reflexive reading. Inoue’s (2020) work on antiracist reading facilitates just writing assessment by encouraging faculty to focus and consider questions such as:

- ⇒ *What details or words in this text am I judging, evaluating, or responding to?*
- ⇒ *Which two habits of White language might my response participate in or activate?*
- ⇒ *How can I read my own ideas or response as participating in these two habits?*
- ⇒ *What experiences or biases (ideas and values) do I have that make my response in this case?*
- ⇒ *Where did my habits come from in my life? Where did I get them, what do they afford me, and how do they limit me? (Inoue, 2020, p.153)*

Working through these questions allows faculty to identify and call out the ways in which their reading and assessment of a body of writing reinforce white language supremacy. It is only through this intentional, reflexive process that faculty are able to correct their

judgments and to evaluate students' writing in a raciolinguistically just manner. Similarly, an antiracist reading framework can be used to guide students' reading of professionally authored works, along with their reading of their own work and the work of their classmates (peer review). As Inoue (2020) reminds us, "In these mindful moments of attending to ourselves, to our biases and fast thinking, to our habits of language, to the structures and systems around us that make us and that we make, to the small but important ways we make sense of words and our world, we can do antiracist work" (p. 154).

Next Steps: Stay Tuned for More...

While I am pleased to be able to release a fully fleshed out framework, this is a work in progress. My goal is to work with postsecondary literacy and learning professionals to do classroom testing to further refine this framework. I am also working with a publisher to make available educational products and resources that support literacy and learning professionals in implementing this framework. Finally, I am putting together a series of training and professional development workshops, based on this framework, to be released in the coming months. I am so excited for this ongoing work and the role it will play in promoting equity and justice in postsecondary literacy and learning.

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