

A Writing-to-Learn Approach to Writing in the Discipline in the Introductory Linguistics Classroom

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In a recent article published in *College English*, McLeod and Maimon note that some researchers have claimed that writing to learn is contrary to writing in the discipline and that time spent on the former does not necessarily contribute to success in the latter (e.g., Knoblauch and Brannon 1983 and Mahala 1991). McLeod and Maimon take issue with this:

Writing to learn is not different from or in opposition to learning to write in the disciplines, nor is it superior. Writing across the curriculum includes both writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines. (580)

This paper supports McLeod and Maimon's position. In particular, it demonstrates that a variety of writing-to-learn assignments (in this case, from a course in introductory linguistics) can contribute to the student's ability to write in the discipline with greater fluency and confidence.

Writing an effective research paper in an introductory survey course like linguistics can be a daunting task because the student needs a thorough understanding of subject matter often consisting of abstract concepts and discipline-specific terminology. In addition to this, the research paper in introductory linguistics generally requires an examination of specialized literature followed by a detailed analysis of a given set of language data cited in earlier research or, better yet, collected firsthand by the student. For these reasons, the best that some linguistics instructors dare hope for by the end of a one-semester course are summaries of recent research of linguistic topics, for example, the differences between men's and women's speech or characteristics of Spanish as it is spoken in the United States.

When I first started teaching undergraduates, I too felt that writing in the discipline in the introductory linguistics course was unattainable. So I lectured, and my students took notes and exams, and completed homework assignments in linguistic problem-solving. However, assuming a new position at the University of Texas at Brownsville, I was informed that campus-wide the university was making an effort to provide students with more writing opportunities in content courses like linguistics. I greeted this news with trepidation. What kind of writing could I expect of my linguistics students? A few days later, I attended a faculty development workshop in WAC to try to answer this question. The workshop and later conversations with colleagues showed me that writing-to-learn activities may have a positive effect on both students and instructor, allowing them to explore the subject matter together in a new way.

With this insight and after further consideration, I altered my expectations of what student writing in my introductory linguistics course should be and how that writing should be achieved. That is, I first decided that assigning a final research paper was inappropriate. With so much material to be covered in the course, I did not have the time to teach my students how to find and read linguistic literature, cite and analyze data, and write a credible linguistic argument. To avoid teaching these skills and simply require my students to write the research paper entirely on their own seemed, quite honestly, cruel. Consequently, instead of a final research paper written in one fell swoop, I devised a multi-task approach comprising a variety of informal writing-to-learn assignments which led to a formal but brief writing-in-the-discipline assignment submitted towards the end of the semester. Linked and assigned gradually across the semester, the writing-to-learn tasks have allowed my students to cite their own language data for the sake of making and supporting the linguistic arguments found in their writing-in-the-discipline activity, something I never could have imagined a few years ago.

The first writing task, given on the second day of class, asks students to select a common language myth from a list provided and write their initial “gut reaction” to that myth. Three representative language myths are listed below:

Myth A: *Spanish, as it is spoken in the Rio Grande Valley, is ungrammatical.*

Myth B: *Children learn to speak their native language by direct imitation of and instruction from their parents and caregivers.*

Myth C: *Some languages are more difficult to learn than other languages.*

At this stage, the language myth assignment neither requires nor encourages a linguistic background. Rather, students are told to let their emotions take over in their responses. (However, the students are told that later in the semester they will reexamine their myths from a more reasoned linguistic framework.) Significantly, even in this beginning stage students generate some interesting discussion about the language myths they have selected. For example, discussing Myth A, Anel¹ notes:

Some Spanish teachers have told me that the Spanish we speak here is not wrong. It is a dialect of the language, and the Spanish from Spain or Mexico is not better than ours. I still have my doubts about that because people from Mexico think the contrary.

As for Myth B, Myra observes:

When we listen to a child's word, we know that he is saying a word that he has already heard before, either from his parents or some other person. Not very often do we hear a child making up a word.

And Dora notes the following about Myth C:

Whenever I encounter Asians and they are in the middle of a conversation, I tell my friends, "Sshhh, I wanna listen." And they point out to me the very obvious fact that I cannot understand a word they are saying.

These reactions and others like them indicate that students have strong opinions about language and that the linguistics course itself may have direct relevance in their lives.

Returned about a week later, the gut-reaction pieces constitute the first part of the language myth writing-in-the-discipline assignment.² Due towards the end of the semester, the second part of the assignment is a three to six page formal paper that completely or partially debunks the language myth in question.

To help students examine the myth by means of a linguistic framework, the returned gut-reaction pieces are accompanied by a number of guiding questions and a brief reading list. For instance, those students addressing the myth about Spanish are asked to consider the linguistic notions of grammatical and ungrammatical. Also, they are asked to read "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," a chapter from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which examines the author's feelings about Spanish and English language usage in South Texas. When

the gut-reaction pieces are returned, students are also provided with the names of classmates addressing the same myth, and they are encouraged to work together in debunking their myths.

Since the goal of the formal paper is to present and support an argument with linguistic data, students are encouraged to use actual linguistic evidence that they encounter in classroom discussion or, preferably, in their speech community. Students are also told that, apart from the recommended reading list, library or on-line research is not necessary for the assignment. The crucial characteristic of the paper is a succinct argument supported by relevant linguistic data. Finally, students are allowed to argue that the myth is indeed correct, as long as they use linguistic argumentation to do so.

As previously noted, the language myth paper is assigned very early in the semester. In this way, students are able to collect data and think about their language myths for an extended time. Classroom lectures and course readings from Fromkin and Rodman's *Introduction to Language* also provide information useful for the final paper. More importantly, throughout the semester students complete five writing-to-learn activities – what I call homework writing response activities, because they are assigned with a homework exercise in linguistic problem-solving. The premise underlying these brief writing-to-learn activities is that the linguistic argumentation skills acquired in them are transferable to the language myth paper. In other words, by writing informal responses to novel linguistic situations, students are able to retain and apply the knowledge that they have gained from course lectures and readings.

Each homework writing response activity asks students to mention and analyze linguistic data in a brief argument. One such writing-to-learn activity for phonetics is given in Appendix A. For this activity, students are asked to use their knowledge of articulatory features and phonetic symbols to illustrate why English speakers, when they misunderstand the rather uncommon name *Chip*, invariably “hear” the name as *Jim*. In other words, students need to explain why *Chip* and *Jim* sound the same.

Addressing this task, Teresa states:

The most obvious correlation between the names *Chip* and *Jim* is the similar high front lax vowel [ɪ]. However, despite the fact that *Mitch* and *Rick* share the same vowel sound, *Jim* is the name people interpret, as the initial sounds [tʃ] and [dʒ], as well as the ultimate sounds [p] and [m], are so similar.

In discussing the characteristics of the sounds in question, Teresa demonstrates a precise use of the International Phonetic Alphabet, namely the symbols within square brackets, and of articulatory features, in this case, “high front lax vowel.” Furthermore, she gives a brief analysis of other data, namely, the names *Rick* and *Mitch*, to support her argument that *Jim* most naturally sounds like *Chip*.

Responding to the same assignment, José writes:

...Jim and Chip sound more similar than people think. The [ch] and [j] (*sic*) sounds at the beginning of each name are both ... palatal affricates.

José’s excerpt is instructive because, though the overall analysis is basically correct, the phonetic symbols used to support that analysis are incorrect. The initial consonant sounds in *Chip* and *Jim* should be transcribed as [tʃ] and [dʒ], respectively. José received full credit for the phonetics assignment, but his work was returned with a brief note explaining the important role the International Phonetic Alphabet plays in linguistics. Many students had similar difficulties representing linguistic data and terminology accurately in the informal writing-to-learn activities. Consequently, each activity was returned with comments about any inaccurate data and how to present the data in question more precisely. In this way, students could avoid similar errors in future assignments and support their analyses with greater success.

Significantly, such errors did not appear as frequently in the final draft of the language myth papers because writing-to-learn activities like the one above allow students to practice new material in a variety of situations, thus playing an important role in the acquisition and appropriate application of course material. As with other introductory survey courses, linguistics is challenging because of a large number of discipline-specific concepts and terminology, such as the International Phonetic Alphabet, an essential tool for anyone working in linguistics. Although one of the most challenging aspects of my course, I have noticed that since assigning the writing-to-learn activity above, students have had a better grasp of the International Phonetic Alphabet and a greater appreciation of its role in linguistics. This is especially interesting because the assignment itself only refers to a handful of the sounds and symbols that the students need to learn. Writing to learn allows students to explore material in a meaningful way that is not always provided by course lectures and textbooks, and, although it may be limited in scope, a writing-to-learn activity can

serve as a crucial aid in the acquisition of a broad range of material. Moreover, writing-to-learn activities that challenge students to express themselves adequately about discipline-specific issues ensure that the retention of the subject matter will be longer lasting than if the material has simply been acquired by rote for the sake of an examination.

A writing-to-learn activity is assigned in each major sub-field of linguistics covered in class: morphology (the study of word structure); phonetics (the study of sounds); phonology (the study of sound patterns); syntax/semantics (the study of sentence structure and meaning); and sociolinguistics (the study of language in relation to society). As the end of the semester nears, students have had enough practice writing short pieces that they can approach the final draft of their writing-in-the-discipline assignment with a greater understanding of what the task requires. Additionally, the five writing-to-learn experiences provide students with the confidence to accomplish the language myth paper, as the students have begun to acquire the argumentation skills necessary for linguistic discourse.

These skills are evident in the final draft of the language myth papers. Many of my students have been able to argue effectively against their language myth, correctly citing personal data and linguistic terminology to support their position. Addressing Myth B about child language acquisition, for example, Karina discusses her son's rather unusual and unfortunate mispronunciation of the word *coffee* and her own efforts to teach him the correct pronunciation:

What really convinced me that children learn language on their own was when I would try to correct Ricky with words or phrases that he uttered incorrectly. For example, when he was about two and a half, he saw a coffee commercial. From the commercial he "learned" how to say coffee. But he learned to say it in a very peculiar way. Until this day he pronounces "coffee" as [f ʌ k i] (rhymes with lucky). This of course was something that I immediately had to correct...

Mother: Ricky, say [k].

Ricky: [k].

Mother: [a].

Ricky: [a].

Mother: [f i].

Ricky: [f i].

Mother: Coffee.

Ricky: [f ʌ k i]!

Karina concludes that Ricky will ultimately learn the correct pronunciation of words at his own pace:

... I always thought that correcting Ricky would help him improve his speech, but after my brief experiment with my son, I realized that he would eventually learn how to pronounce words correctly on his own.

Another example of successful linguistic argumentation comes from Dora's discussion of Myth C, that is, that some languages are easier to learn than others. Fluent in Spanish and English, Dora questions whether it would be easy for a Spanish speaker to learn Italian:

Italian is very similar to Spanish, yet this could work against the learner. An example of how cognates can create confusion is illustrated by the following excerpt, which is a conversation depicted between a mother and child in *Oggi in Italia* (Merlonghi et al. 1991: 137).

Child: Tornate presto! Non tardate!

'Return soon! Don't be late!'

Mother: Tu, intanto, sii buono! Non guardare la televisione!

'You, in the meantime, be good! Don't watch television!'

The conversation could be understood perfectly until the end of the last statement, which includes the word *guardare*. Since Italian and Spanish derive from the same language (*sic*), it would seem that this word would have the same, or at least similar, meaning in both languages. But, *guardar* in Spanish means 'to keep; put something away; protect'. In Italian, though, the word means 'to look' or 'to watch'.

Later, Dora notes that because Italian and Spanish are Romance languages, Spanish-speakers learning Italian as a second language may indeed have some special challenges *because of the languages' similarities*. Dora goes on to discuss Indonesian and suggests that, even though Indonesian is not related to Spanish, some of the structural aspects of Indonesian (e.g., pronunciation and subject-verb agreement) may be relatively easy to master for the native-speaker of Spanish.

Although a three to six page language myth paper cannot include all that is demanded for a full-fledged linguistics research paper, such as a detailed review of current literature, I was especially pleased by texts like those above. They demonstrate an effective attempt to use actual

linguistic data to support an argument, a challenging skill for students in an introductory linguistics course. Furthermore, the evidence cited to disprove, or at least partially disprove, the language myth is for the most part original language data observed by the student, as opposed to data cited by some other linguistic researcher.

At the end of the semester, I asked students to write anonymous impressions of the writing program they completed in introductory linguistics. Although there were no clear comments about how the writing-to-learn activities assigned across the semester helped contribute to their ultimate understanding of how to write in the discipline, overall students found the writing-to-learn tasks and the writing-in-the-discipline task to be favorable, as suggested by the following comments:

Writing is scary for me as a student... However, the writing of our gut-feeling for the myth was not nerve-wracking because I didn't have to be perfect. I was relieved and enjoyed the language myth activity. I think because the assignments were short, they were enjoyable.

After everything we had learned, I was able to do a better job on my language myth essay. I was able to find valid data that supported my theory.

All the writing assignments were very good because they make you think about exactly what you wanna say, and you have to say it right or else it could be ambiguous.

...the writing exercises and the language myth have helped me understand the foundations of linguistics.

These and other student comments suggest that, considered as a whole, the writing-to-learn activities had a positive effect on the writing-in-the-discipline activity.

The variety of writing-to-learn tasks and the short formal writing-in-the-discipline task benefited the students in two significant ways. First, as discussed above, the writing-to-learn activities, which were assigned throughout the semester and which addressed various linguistic sub-disciplines, provided some of the fundamental background necessary for quality writing in the discipline. Second, based on my observations in the classroom and student comments like those above, I believe that both types of writing assignments helped my students gain a more solid under-

standing of linguistics and linguistic argumentation. This second observation, that writing fosters learning, is supported by Langer and Applebee (1987) who, citing quantitative evidence from academic classrooms in the public schools, argue that “effective writing instruction provides carefully structured support or *scaffolding* as students undertake new and more difficult tasks.” And, as students complete those tasks, they “internalize information and strategies relevant to the tasks...” (139) Arguably, the writing-to-learn tasks that my students completed served as scaffolding for the writing-in-the-discipline task. Moreover, when taken together, all of the writing tasks served as scaffolding in the students’ overall understanding and retention of the course material, as well as the ability to apply their linguistic knowledge to situations involving language.

Of course, my approach comprising a formal medium-length writing-in-the-discipline task and a variety of brief writing-to-learn tasks was not without problems. Specifically, in order for students to benefit from and be able to apply the writing-to-learn activities to their writing-in-the-discipline assignment, student responses to these activities need to be read carefully and commented upon in considerable detail. Detailed assessment of writing-to-learn activities is very time-consuming, placing a special burden on instructors with heavy teaching loads and large classes. A partial remedy might be to teach writing in the discipline to the class as a whole before or after each writing-to-learn activity, something I tried when I returned a writing-to-learn assignment in phonology. This remedy presents its own problems, however, because lecturing on the specifics of writing in the discipline takes time away from lectures on course content. I presently see two solutions to this. The simpler solution, though only a partial one, is to include more explicit instructions and helpful notes on avoiding common problems with each writing assignment. Although more challenging, the second solution seems more appropriate: reformat my lectures so that course content and discipline-specific writing tips are presented simultaneously.

To summarize, my students’ experiences writing a variety of linked assignments in the introductory linguistics classroom support McLeod and Maimon’s observation that effective WAC entails writing to learn *College English* 62 (2000): 573-583.

and writing in the discipline. Although disciplines and course specifics will differ, I believe a sequenced combination of writing-to-learn tasks assigned throughout the semester can help students achieve quality writing in the discipline, preparing them for further coursework and research in the subject matter.

Endnotes

¹ All of the students mentioned in this paper have given their permission to cite their names and work.

² The assignment sheet, as well as all the other handouts mentioned in this paper, are available upon request from the author (prpetrucci@utb.edu)

Works Cited

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- Mahala, Daniel. "Writing Utopias: Writing Across the Curriculum and the Promise of Reform." *College English* 53 (1991): 773-89.
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Appendix A
Writing-to-Learn Assignment Sheet

English 3319 – Dr. Petrucci

Name _____

Homework Writing Response #2 – Phonetics (Due Monday, February 12)

Answer the writing prompt below. You should spend at least thirty minutes on this writing assignment. You will be graded on content only. Please write legibly.

Writing prompt: The other day Professor Chip Dameron of the English Department told me that people sometimes have trouble catching his first name in informal conversations. To be specific, although Professor Dameron introduces himself as “Chip”, he is often misunderstood as having uttered “Jim.” The most likely reason for the misunderstanding is that people are not accustomed to the first name Chip, which is not as common as, for instance, Bob or Jim or Paul. However, it is especially interesting to note that when Professor Dameron’s first name is misunderstood, people invariably “hear” the name as Jim, rather than, say, Mitch or Rick or Steve or Bill.

Using your knowledge of the articulatory features of phonetics, explain why people would mistake the name Jim – as opposed to some other first name – for Chip. Be sure to use the appropriate phonetic terminology in your response.

HINT: Since your answer should explain why Chip and Jim “sound the same,” you might want to begin this exercise by writing the two names phonetically.

Chip _____

Jim _____

(use other side if necessary)

NOTE: Listed below are the four other WTL assignments addressing the following sub-disciplines and available, on request, from the author:

1. phonology (the study of sound patterns)
2. morphology (the study of word structure)
3. syntax-semantics (the study of sentence patterns and meaning)
4. sociolinguistics (the study of language in relation to society)