Critical Language Study and Modern English Grammar in Context

Phillip M Carter, Florida International University
Somewhere along the way in my own education in English departments, I inherited the belief that it makes good sense for undergraduate students majoring in English to take a required course in English grammar, variably titled Modern English Grammar, Modern English Structure, or some other iteration of those terms (see Torbert 2011). I also inherited the belief that, for those students who plan to become English teachers, this course will be especially useful, if for no other reason than learning the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to teaching grammar. I never challenged that inheritance, even after teaching the course for the first time, when it was painfully obvious that the material that teachers-in-training actually needed—how to address written and spoken language variation in the classroom, how to help students become better English writers, and how to teach students when to use a dash and when to use a semicolon, for example—were largely absent from the textbook and my own syllabus.

Teacher-education students were not getting what they needed to be able to talk about English grammar in the classroom, let alone stage critical conversations with their students about the subject. At the same time, I found it difficult to explain to the non-teacher-education students how, for example, “WH-movement” would enrich their experience as English majors in any way. Neither group seemed to understand how to reconcile the uncomfortable yoking of an impassioned emphasis on “descriptive grammar,” on the one hand, with a fervent insistence for producing flawless tree diagrams, on the other.

Questions about the value (and ethics) of the content of English grammar courses are all the more pronounced in the context of ethnically and linguistically diverse student bodies, where students live the consequences of disaffirming language ideologies (Silverstein 1996; Lippi-Green 1997; Woolard 1998) on a daily basis. Work in linguistic anthropology, ethnic studies, and sociolinguistics has shown that immigrant and ethnolinguistic minority students are particularly vulnerable to popular discourses and language ideologies that construct their community language forms as inferior (e.g., Zentella 1997; Santa Ana 2002; Chavez 2008; Carter 2014). For many students, Modern English Grammar constitutes the only encounter with the linguistic study of language in an entire undergraduate curriculum and may therefore provide the only occasion to engage students critically with
basic information about the types of language found in their homes and communities.

When I was asked to teach this course three years ago at Florida International University (FIU), a “Hispanic-serving institution” in South Florida where roughly 70% of the student body is of Latino heritage, I decided that I would allow myself to think critically about what it means to teach this course in that context. I began by questioning the premise: perhaps a 15-week survey of modern English grammar is not time well spent for most students, especially in the context of contemporary large public universities in which undergraduates are pressured to finish their degrees as quickly as possible. With fewer and fewer opportunities for electives, the burden falls on required courses, such as Modern English Grammar, to pay out the promise of their investment with content that is both professionally and personally productive.

Therefore, after several weeks of critical evaluation and thought about what would be most useful to undergraduate English majors at an institution such as FIU, I decided to strip the course down, keeping what I thought were the most important elements from the traditional grammar syllabus, removing content that I thought was not useful, and allocating the newly available space to instruction and critical conversations about the structure of English language variation, with an emphasis on language variation in the local community and in educational contexts. In addition to making space for “new” content, I endeavored to teach the “old” grammatical concepts within the socially rich contexts where they naturally occur; that is, within a sociolinguistic context.

In this article, I outline strategies for incorporating language variation, attention to local speech communities, and information for educators on linguistic diversity as core, rather than ancillary, parts of the Modern English Grammar curriculum. I was inspired, in particular, by the work of the many sociolinguists who have, for many decades, written about how best to approach grammar instruction in primary, secondary, and postsecondary educational settings (e.g., Smitherman 1977; Rickford and Rickford 1995; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999; Curzan 2002, 2009; Blake and Cutler 2003; Godley et al. 2006; Reaser 2006; Reaser and Adger 2007; Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2010; McBee-Orzulak 2013) as well as by Alim’s (2005) call for critical language pedagogy and Zentella’s (1997, 13) call for anthropopolitical linguistics, the goal of which is “to understand and facilitate a stigmatized group’s attempts to construct a positive self within an economic and political context that relegates its members to static and disparaged ethnic, racial, and class identities, and that identifies them with static and disparaged linguistic codes.” As a final point of introduction, I should
note that I am by no means the first linguist to integrate a nonstatic view of
language into a course on Modern English Grammar (see Durian, Papke,
and Sampson 2009 for a discussion of language variation in undergraduate
linguistics courses). Indeed, the articles published in the pedagogical section
of this journal are a testament to linguists’ commitment to teaching inspired
content. My purpose in this article is simply to outline my own approach,
to demonstrate strategies for making variation a core, rather than ancillary,
course component, and to describe a few ways in which interested readers
can adapt similar courses in their own programs.1

OVERVIEW AND SYLLABUS. The course described here is based on a 15-week
semester, with 29 class meetings and one final examination period, and
enrolls around 30 students per semester. Roughly the first two weeks of the
term cover introductory matters, including an overview of the history of
the English language, perspectives on grammar, and a primer on grammatical
variation in Modern English. Subsequent weeks were divided into four
thematic sections: “English Morphology and Form-Class Words,” “Function-
Class Words,” “Phrases and Clauses,”2 and “Grammatical Variation.” I was
conscious that because the unit on variation appears last on the syllabus,
students may get the impression that its content was ancillary to the “real”
material. This was of concern since the goal of the reimagined syllabus was
to give students the richest possible account of English grammar, which, in
my view, requires that fluidity in time (a historical perspective) and space
(a sociocultural perspective) be central to the account. I attended to that
concern in three ways: through (1) the conceptual work performed by the
course description and course objectives, (2) the introductory material that
presents a functional, nonstatic view of grammar, and (3) the instructional
framework for teaching the traditional grammar material.

Students come to Modern English Grammar with many misconceptions
about what the course is and why they are required to take it, the
most common of which are that the course is designed “to improve the way
you speak,” “to teach you proper grammar,” or “to improve your writing.”
Unfortunately, it is all too easy for students to read the traditional grammar
syllabus as consistent with these notions, even when variation finds itself
somehow represented in the course plan. To mitigate against that view, I use
the course description as a space to historicize the notion of grammar and to
subject it to critique even before introducing the first grammatical element
to students. I introduce the notion of “grammatical structure” in the second
paragraph of the course description, not the first, to destabilize the belief
that there is always only one way of thinking about grammar. I emphasize that
grammar is a historical production, of sorts, which I find fits well the notion
that “language is always changing,” a refrain students are aware of even as they believe, paradoxically, that “Standard English” is historically immutable. The goals for the course are divided into three conceptual areas—critical, informational, and professional—and are presented as questions meant to invite the students to discover the answer:

Goals
1. **Critical**: What is grammar? What does it mean to talk about “good” and “bad” grammar? Who benefits from such distinctions? Who suffers? Where do notions of “grammatical correctness” come from in the first place?
2. **Informational**: How are words formed in English? How do English speakers group words together in meaningful ways? What types of linguistic structures does English make use of? How does English express time? How does English express action? How does the grammar of English vary among different groups of speakers?
3. **Practical/Professional**: How do I address dialect variation in my own classroom? How do I design lessons that respect differences in home language? How can I help speakers of nonstandard varieties acquire classroom varieties?

A list of specific course objectives follows the goals, and, here again, variation is foregrounded and interwoven with other learning outcomes.

Class sessions addressing the traditional Modern English Grammar material can also provide the occasion for students to consider language variation and change. In-class activities help to reinforce a dynamic, nonstatic view of English grammar, rather than presenting the structures of Modern English as ahistorical. This also helps to destabilize closely held beliefs about the immutability of “correct” grammatical forms. This slow but consistent destabilization sets up a seamless transition into our final unit of the term, which addresses the structure of English language variation, attitudes about language variation, and applications for understanding language variation in education. The final unit of the term becomes, therefore, a continuation of a conversation the course had staged since the first day, rather than an additive component that could be seen as ancillary or orthogonal to the “real” content.

For the skeptical reader, I would like to point out that, rather than burdening students with three weeks or more of new material, the material on language variation during the final weeks of the semester actually requires students to recall and reengage with earlier course content. For example, in a homework activity focusing on variation in verbal structures, students are asked to review “linking” and “auxiliary” verbs and to create examples of sentences from standardized English, before providing examples of the ways these verbal structures can be treated in African American English.
In addition to occasioning continuous encounters with “core” content, the approach outlined here is pedagogically valuable in two other ways. First, it asks students to personalize the content by thinking about the use of particular structures in their own speech and writing and in the language they hear and see around them. Second, this material encourages students to think critically about the content, by asking them to consider the consequences of beliefs and attitudes about linguistic difference in various institutional settings, especially education. For example, homework activities, described below, and assigned readings from *Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools* (Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2010), ask students to think about specific moments in their own lives at school and at home that helped produce their personal beliefs about grammar. In addition to providing new content about the structured nature of nonstandard varieties of English, this material also reinforces key concepts in personal and critical contexts, thus giving students a more complicated, nuanced, and richer view of “grammar” and, hopefully, a more productive experience with the course.

**Teaching Method: A Team-Based Learning Approach.** Part of my reimagining of the course involved thinking of ways to sustain student motivation throughout the semester and to provide support for students who find the material challenging. I decided to implement an instructional strategy called Team-Based Learning (Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink 2004), in which students are grouped in permanent teams of 4–7 members and the traditional lecture-based format is minimized in favor of hands-on, team-based activities. I admit that adapting the course to Team-Based Learning required a tremendous amount of labor on my part, but it was time well spent, as students are both more motivated for class and perform better on assessment. This structure, I have found over the past three years, works very well with the grammar material in particular, including material on linguistic variation, as students are able to pool knowledge, become accustomed to asking questions, and in general have a support system of peers throughout the term.

Team-based instruction allows students with different attitudes about language and language variation to learn from each other through high-impact, sustained teamwork. Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink (2004) recommend constituting teams in ways that maximize team diversity, broadly conceived, and minimize or eliminate prior knowing among students. During the first week of the semester, I do this by collecting data from students about their language backgrounds, interest in the course, and familiarity with grammatical concepts. In addition, I also collect data on students’ language attitudes by asking them to agree or disagree with statements about language and language variation, focusing on concepts we will cover in the unit on language variation, as well as locally salient language ideologies. Students submit an
index card with their responses, which I use to group them into maximally
diverse teams. For example, on the second day of the course, I recently asked
students to evaluate the following statements:

1. As a general rule, it’s a good idea to speak like you write.
2. It’s fairly easy to assess a person’s level of intelligence based on their use of
   English grammar.
3. The quality of the English language is worse now than it was 25 years ago.
4. In Miami, bilinguals tend not to know the grammar of English or Spanish
   very well.
5. The best English is spoken in England.
6. It’s fairly easy to assess a person’s level of education based on their use of
   English grammar.
7. People who mix English and Spanish are probably ________.

Some of the statements tap into language ideologies that circulate broadly in
the United States, while others reflect instantiations of language ideologies
I have encountered in Miami. For example, ideologies of monolingualism
(Macías 1985; Santa Ana 2002) are common in Miami, where language
mixing is the norm for many speakers. I have found that addressing gram-
matical constraints on code-switching and the grammar of “Spanglish” has
been an important topic to address with my students, and collecting data
from them from the outset of the semester helps me gauge what attitudinal
baggage a given group of students is bringing with them to class. I have also
found student-centered teams to be highly productive in helping students
develop more sophisticated, linguistically informed perspectives on language,
since students teach and influence one another throughout the course of
the semester.

In concert with Team-Based Learning, I have also implemented the use
of i-clickers in Modern English Grammar (see Marlow 2010 for i-clicker
best practices). I-clickers are a valuable tool for teaching linguistic vari-
ation because they provide a quick, reliable, anonymous way for all students
to participate in class conversations. In addition, they help demonstrate
the variation inherent in the speech and language beliefs of the class. For
example, I give an in-class exercise that asks students to assess verbs with
past-tense forms and participles that have either fluctuated historically or
vary regionally today, such as bring, forbid, or dive. At the end of the activity,
I ask students to use i-clickers to select the form they use most frequently,
and I am able to show, in real time, the percentages for each response (e.g.,
88% brought, 16% brang, 2% brung), thus demonstrating that even within a
class of students who speak the same dialect of English, there is not 100%
consensus about common grammatical forms.
In the following sections, I outline the overall structure of the course, which begins with two weeks of critical language study and ends with four weeks focusing on grammatical variation in modern English and issues related to language policy, curriculum, and instruction. I devote the middle nine-week period to traditional grammar content, beginning with morphology and ending with clauses. I do not outline this part of the course here, but I would like to point out that throughout this part of the course, I make note of the parts of the grammar that all speakers of the English language use (e.g., place adjectives before nouns), as well as the things that only some speakers do (e.g., combine modal verbs). In other words, variation is a part of the critical backdrop of the course throughout the term.

The first two weeks: establishing common ground. To help students adjust to the critical perspectives on grammar the course articulates, I spend the first two weeks (or four instructional periods) establishing a critical language framework for the course. The point is to help students adjust to the course’s critical, nonstatic view of grammar and to recalibrate student expectations for the course, which tend to vary wildly from my expectations. The process begins by ascertaining student attitudes about language in general and language in the community, as described above. In the second and third class periods, I give students a condensed history of the English language, in which I introduce the notion of historical contingency—namely, that nonlinguistic events instantiate linguistic effects—and highlight the many “external” influences on the development of English grammar and lexicon. This brief history of the language helps to destabilize students’ belief in the fixity of English grammar, highlights the dynamic nature of grammar, and illustrates the dialectic between grammatical forms and the historical/cultural contexts of their use. In particular, I use this material to emphasize two constructs that endure throughout the course: time and movement.

By establishing time and movement as major themes for the course, students are able to appreciate from the outset that “Modern English Grammar”—whatever they believe that to be—is the effect of the contingencies of human evolution, human cognition, history, and culture. It is relatively easy for students to understand that grammar is in many ways about contingencies—the Norman Invasion, for example, resulted in the incorporation of thousands of Latinate words through French. I put that example next to another event more recent (time) and closer (movement) to my students’ experience: the Castro revolution in 1959 Cuba, followed by the total relocation of that country’s bourgeoisie to Miami and an instant contact situation between Spanish and English that has endured for a half century, resulting in new ways of talking in south Florida. The juxtaposition between William
the Conqueror and Fidel Castro clarifies several points. First, grammar is a historical product, not the mystical abstraction many undergraduates take it to be. Second, one of these events (i.e., Norman Invasion) put into play changes to the language that we now consider to be “standard,” while the other (i.e., Castro Revolution) resulted in a contact situation that produced language varieties that are mostly stigmatized in south Florida—Miami Cuban English, “Spanglish,” and local varieties of Spanish. This opens up space to talk, from the outset of the semester, about dialect variation and language attitudes. Some students “get it” right away, others are more resistant, but all of them are captivated, and the team-based format provides a built-in space for students to talk out their reactions to introductory content.

By the third class, students are already starting to see English grammar as far more contingent, material, and variant than the idealized abstraction many of them brought to class on the first day. Following the primer on the history of English and conversations on dialect variation, student teams complete two exercises that reinforce our basic notions about time and movement and that introduce the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammars. The first activity is an adaptation of “Dialect Myths and Realities,” found in Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2007, 7–9). I give the teams a scrambled list of statements, each of which they must collectively identify as a “dialect myth” or “dialect reality” and match true statements with false ones. Teams then work together to derive the rules for -a-prefixing in Appalachian English by analyzing data found in exercise 1 from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2007, 4–5). It has been quite remarkable over the past three semesters to see students—many of whom have never heard this feature previously—discover the regular patterning of dialects by deriving its rules. An additional benefit is that students learn the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammars by playing the role of descriptive linguist themselves. Upon completing this exercise, I verify that the prescriptive/descriptive distinction is clear by asking teams to use i-clickers to decide whether a series of statements exemplify either descriptive or prescriptive grammar rules. Students see a rule on the screen—“never end a sentence in a preposition”—for example, and identify it as a descriptive or prescriptive rule by clicking A or B on their i-clickers. Because the i-clicker data appear in real time, it is easy to see if the concept warrants further discussion. If there is not consensus, students can discuss responses in their teams, and we repeat the question. In sum, students learn foundational concepts—standards and vernaculars, prescriptive and descriptive grammars, and the realities of dialects—by working together on hands-on exercises that introduce a critical, nonstatic view of grammar.
After students have had some time to adjust to this approach during the first week of the term, I ask them during the second week to consider their own personal relationship to our objects of analysis: prescriptive and descriptive grammar, standards and vernaculars, language attitudes, authorities of grammar, and so on. I require students to write a three-to-five-page personal reflection essay in which they think through their own history with “standardized” English. The assignment, which I adapted from a suggestion in Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010), asks students to consider how they first learned about standardized English, how encounters with standardized English in school shaped their own attitudes about language, and how those experiences may have even shaped their own individual identities. For most of my students, the home variety is very different from the standardized school English, which is important for students to think through critically. I also want students whose home variety closely corresponds to the school variety to recognize it as a form of privilege (McIntosh 1988; Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2010). The assignment prompt also asks students to read a short vignette about “Tanya” (Wolfram 2000), a new student who is ridiculed by her classmates because of the way she talks when she introduces herself on her first day in class. The story is designed as a resource for teachers and is part of a larger article for teaching tolerance, titled “Everyone Has an Accent.” Readers can find the entire article on the Teaching Tolerance website (http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-18-fall-2000/everyone-has-accent).

This assignment emphasizes that the relationship students have with “grammar” is personal, rooted in specific experiences related to language attitudes in the community, especially those held by people in positions of power, which helps students to detach from their belief in a singular, immutable “English grammar.” Students discuss their experiences with standardized school English in teams on the day the essays are due.

At this point in the semester, we transition into morphological analysis, form-class words, phrases and clauses, and so on. During this part of the course, I take great care to maintain my emphasis on Modern English grammatical structure as the result of historical, cultural, cognitive, cultural, and evolutionary contingency. One productive way to do this is by historicizing the structures that the students encounter as they encounter them. For example, when working with tense and aspect, I give students a brief overview of progressive constructions in the history of English, showing the trajectory from occasional use in Old English, to the development of progressives with modals, infinitives, and perfectives in the Middle English period, through to the full range of progressives with future and passive constructions in Modern English. Students are of course thrilled to learn that a construction such as The house is being built, perfectly unremarkable in today’s grammar,
was not possible until around the eighteenth century. This type of historicizing helps students appreciate the dynamic nature of grammar and creates a sense of continuity from the beginning of the term through to the final unit on grammatical variation.

**Final four weeks on grammatical variation.** Each semester I have taught this course, I have increased the number of instructional days I dedicate to critical language awareness. On course evaluations, students have indicated that this is the most important aspect of the course. In Miami, where success means speaking perfectly “unaccented” English, this material is oftentimes the most challenging for students. The final unit of the semester consists of seven or eight class meetings, roughly one month of the semester, and covers the following topics in detail: a review of standards and vernaculars, grammatical variation in regional varieties of U.S. English, the grammar of African American English, the grammar of Latino/Chicano English, the grammar of Spanglish, and issues in policy, education, and assessment.

Even though dedicating more time to this material takes time away from the traditional elements of the course, the unit requires that we recall material from throughout the semester. That is, students still learn grammatical concepts from the traditional syllabus even as they learn to think broadly and critically about it. I have discovered that these teaching projects (i.e., “English grammar” and “language variation”) need not unfold in separate courses. For example, to understand copula variation in African American and Latino English, students must first know a good deal about copular constructions, including knowing about complements, predicate nominatives and predicate adjectives, and linking constructions. To understand inflectional loss, students must first be able to understand inflection as a grammatical process, appreciate the loss of morphological inflections in the history of the English language, and be able to identify the inflectional morphemes of Modern English. To understand the intra- and inter-sentential code-switching that is integral to “Spanglish,” students must know a good deal about clauses, phrase structure rules, and constituency in general. Therefore, all of the lectures in this unit recycle and reinforce concepts from the middle part of the course.

For the final unit on grammatical variation, we switch textbooks, moving from *Analyzing English Grammar* (Klammer, Schulz, and Volpe 2010) to *Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools* (Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2010), an excellent resource that includes information about the structure of grammatical variation in some varieties of American English as well as information for future educators. This focus is productive for several reasons. First, many students take this course as a requirement for teacher
education programs and have reported that they do not encounter serious discussions of language variation in schools elsewhere in the education curriculum. More generally, because educational settings have shaped the language attitudes of all students, it is useful for students to engage critically with the sources of their attitudes and to see themselves as agents who can affect change in these settings. Another text that works very well with this focus is Curzan and Adams’s How English Works (2012), which is written specifically for English and education majors and covers both the grammar of English and English grammatical variation.

On the first day of the unit, I screen the documentary American Tongues (1986) and give students time to discuss the film in teams, which invariably results in many personal epiphanies and introspective comments from students. Because most readers of this journal are likely very familiar with American Tongues, I will say only that despite its focus on variation in pronunciation and the lexicon—and that it is now somewhat dated—the film still provides a reliable and productive way to begin a unit on grammatical variation, as it allows students to hear and see variation as well as attitudes about language, many of which correspond to their own beliefs or beliefs they have heard articulated in their homes and communities. The first activity, corresponding to the film, is simple and unintimidating: write a 500-word summary of the film, outlining the major points and providing examples as necessary to illustrate the main ideas of the film.

The second day of the unit focuses on standards and vernaculars and spoken language versus written language. The students read the first two chapters of Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010) in advance of class, and time in class is structured around team-based activities that give students the chance to work with and talk out these concepts. The first team-based activity comes from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2007) and ask students to label sentences in a related set, such as those in (1)–(4), below, “nonstandard English,” “informal standard English,” or “superstandard English.” Although many students may believe there is a very clear line between “standard” and “vernacular,” the exercise helps them to discover that standardness and vernacularity are continual and gradient, not always separate and discrete.

1. He’s not as smart as I.
2. He’s not so smart as I.
3. He ain’t as smart as me.
4. He not as smart as me.

A second activity asks students to work with standard and vernacular forms in terms of meaning. Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010, 87) suggest an activity that asks students to compare poetry written in different varieties
of English. Students receive three poems in their teams: one each by E. E. Cummings (“Buffalo Bill’s”), Paul Anthony Dunbar (“Accountability”), and Tato Laviera (“My Graduation Speech”), a Puerto Rican-born poet who writes in Spanglish. All of the poems contain nonstandard grammatical forms. Students work in teams to rewrite the poems in monolingual, standardized English and then to reflect on both versions by answering team-based discussion questions: How do the poems differ grammatically from the norms of standardized English? How does your “translated” version compare with the authors’ originals? Does the translation reflect the original poem’s meaning, style, tone, and voice? What are the implications? The diversity of the student teams means that different students are more or less familiar with the various nonstandard features of the poems and are able to help each other understand the intended “sense” of a given lexical choice. Here again I direct readers to Torbert (2011) for a full discussion on the use of literary texts in Modern English Grammar course.

We then turn to regional varieties of English in the next class. Students read “Southern English: A Regional and Cultural Variety,” chapter 3 from Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010). During class, students are given copies of short articles from Language Magazine, which publishes popular articles of general interest for educators on language and dialects. Short articles, such as Eble’s “Speaking of the Big Easy” (2002), provide students with accessible and memorable accounts of various regional dialects in North America. Readers can find a variety of useful teaching resources at http://www.language magazine.com. I also play for the class speech samples of various Southern dialects (e.g., Ocracoke English, Appalachian English) and provide complete transcripts for each. Teams are asked to follow along with the transcripts as they listen and then identify the nonstandard grammatical forms they hear using the most technical language possible (e.g., “multiple modals”). Again, this activity both introduces new content—in this case, the fact that modals can be concatenated in certain Southern varieties—at the same time that it requires a review of what modal verbs are in the first place.

We spend two days examining grammatical variation in ethnic dialects of American English. The first day focuses on the grammar of African American English. Students read “African American English: An Ethnic and Cultural Variety,” chapter 4 of Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010). In class, I give a short lecture on the history of African American English, which helps to recycle the foundational course constructs of TIME and MOVEMENT. In class, I use i-clickers in a grammaticality judgment task on habitual be. I show a series of sentences one-by-one on the screen (e.g., My mom be coming home right now and My mom always be coming home late) and ask students to click in to indicate if they believe the utterance is grammatical in African American
English. We go through the series of sentences twice. The first time through, students rely on their intuitions to make a decision. We then pause to discuss habitual be explicitly and then repeat the grammaticality task. This time, students talk in their teams to arrive at the best answer. This type of structured team-based activity using i-clickers works well to teach a variety of other nonstandard forms, such as copula absence. Here again, students discover the answers themselves through a combination of application and learning from teammates who may have native-speaker intuitions, resulting in a more memorable experience than a traditional lecture.

The second day on ethnic dialects of American English focuses on grammatical variation in U.S. Latino communities and addresses both the grammar of Chicano/Latino varieties as well as the grammatical constraints on Spanish/English code-switching. The latter of these I find especially edifying to my students, who tend to have inherited fairly negative attitudes about code-mixing. In preparation for class, students read “The Grammar of Spanglish,” chapter 6 of Zentella’s (1997) Growing Up Bilingual, which, in addition to offering a comprehensive overview of Spanglish grammar, also provides a thorough review of concepts for the student of Modern English Grammar (e.g., constituency, form and structure class words, phrases, clauses, free and bound morphemes). To demonstrate that students have intuitions about when switches are and are not possible, I give students an exercise adapted from Toribio’s (2002) study of Spanish/English code switching, in which she asked bilingual participants to rate the acceptability of two fairytales that had been translated into Spanglish, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves/Blancanieves y los Siete Enanitos” and “The Beggar Prince/El Príncipe Pordiosero.” While “The Beggar Prince” is written with grammatical switches between Spanish and English, “Snow White” contains numerous ungrammatical switches. Invariably, students find “The Beggar Prince” easy to read and unproblematic but stumble through “Snow White.” Follow-up questions ask students to examine the grammar of the switch points in both and to determine a set of rules for when code alternation may be possible.

We discuss social, cognitive, and linguistic motivations for code-switching and inter- versus intra-sentential switches. Students are able to relate this content to their own experiences with code-mixing in Miami, which of course is not limited to Spanish, but also Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Russian and other languages. Even those students who are not bilingual have experience overhearing code alternation given its ubiquity in south Florida and are therefore able to participate, even if they do not understand Spanish. Here again, I use i-clickers in grammaticality judgment tasks in structured team-based group activities to probe students own intuitions about the forms in question. Though students do not always agree, there is usually consensus
that some types of switches sound intuitively better than others. “We went *lentamente* to the market” is okay, but “We went *slowmente*” is not. Similarly we see that “I saw *el coche azul*” (‘I saw a blue car’) is acceptable to most people, but “I saw *el coche blue*” is not (adjectives follow nouns in Spanish). It happens to be the case that student intuitions about these forms correspond to some of the constraints described in the literature, the “free morpheme constraint,” in the first case, and the “equivalence constraint” in the second. While I do not hold students accountable for reading and understanding the full breadth of the literature on Spanish/English code-switching, I do want them to recognize that for as grammatically flexible as “Spanglish” seems to be, it is not the case that anything goes.

The final two meetings of the unit are dedicated to the topic of education and assessment. Students read “Assessment and Application,” chapter 5 of Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2010). In teams, students talk about the dilemmas educators face when teaching native speakers of nonstandard dialects, the educational consequences for African American students whose teachers are not linguistically informed, and a number of language-related issues involved in test design, as discussed in the chapter. Students then work in their teams on a structured activity that requires them to confront the problems and opportunities linguistic diversity presents teachers. Each team receives a teaching scenario in which they are to imagine working as linguistically informed teachers in various educational settings, such as: (1) an elementary school language arts class in a Latino neighborhood where most of the students speak Spanish as their first language, (2) a middle school social studies teacher in a diverse neighborhood where a variety of home dialects are spoken, (3) a middle school language arts class where most of the students speak African American English, and (4) a high school English class in an affluent neighborhood with little student diversity. The students have to determine what the potential problems will be and devise novel solutions that they then present to the class.

Homework questions from this part of the course require students to compare and contrast the standard and nonstandard grammatical structures we have studied, thus teaching them about the patterning of nonstandard grammatical structures while reinforcing traditional content. The following questions exemplify this approach:

1. This semester we have studied linking verbs and auxiliary verbs. Define and provide an example of each in standardized English.

2. What options do speakers of African American English have for producing linking and auxiliary verbs? Give an example. (Note that habitual *be* is not an option!)
3. *She running* is a grammatical utterance in African American English, but *I running* is not. Why?

4. How might a speaker of a nonstandard variety of English produce the sentence *I didn’t ever see anyone* using multiple negation?

5. Your answer in question four, above, is considered nonstandard in English, but similar constructions with multiple negation are considered standard in many other languages. Name three languages in which multiple negation is considered standard. Give one example of a sentence in one of those languages that contains multiple negation, and provide an English translation.

The final homework assignment asks students to observe, record, and analyze the nonstandard verb and noun forms they read or overhear over a two-week period. I ask students to record examples from a variety of sources, including the casual conversations in which they participate or overhear, broadcast media (e.g., radio or television), and print (e.g., Internet, magazines, graffiti, signage, newspapers). In a summary paragraph, they describe their findings, making note of the patterns they observed in their data. The activity reinforces the “macro” lessons of the course, namely, that English grammar exists in the real world, not in the abstractions found in grammar textbooks, and that “Modern English” grammar is not comprised of an homogenous, immutable set of linguistic structures, but rather is characterized by inherent systematic variability.

**Final Project.** The course culminates in a final project designed to address some aspect of grammatical variation covered during the semester. Because many students enroll in this course because they plan to become educators, the first option is a teaching project that allows students to describe how they will incorporate English dialect variation into their own teaching. Most students who choose this option create a detailed lesson plan or minicurriculum that works in the context of their own courses, which have ranged from high school English to middle school social studies to elementary school language arts. In addition to the lesson plan, students write up a short commentary that describes the context in which they will be teaching and addresses their teaching goals and objectives, anticipated challenges, materials used, imagined in-class activities, assignments, and so on. Because some students work as writing tutors, either for college students or in the community with non-native speakers, I also allow students to write an essay in which they imagine a “linguistically informed” writing center, one that takes into account the full range of conversations the class has staged around standardization, language variation, and, in the Miami context, language contact. For both of these projects, I encourage students to consult the many linguistic resources for teachers that are now online, including Charity Hudley

For those students not pursuing a career in teaching, I offer three additional final project possibilities that address course goals having to do with language variation. The first is a research paper that documents the “Ebonics Controversy” of 1997. Although the controversy itself is now somewhat dated, it nevertheless instructs students on many important language-related issues, including the complicated intersection of language, politics, ethnicity, and educational policy, while at the same time reminding students of key grammatical constructs from the course and key critical concepts (e.g., language ideology, standards and vernaculars).

Each semester I have taught the course, I have identified areas in which my students could benefit from critical education and have designed final project assignments that address these areas. I have discovered that some students, many native Spanish speakers or native bilinguals, harbor the belief that Spanish is in some way grammatically or structurally inferior to English. As a result, I have offered students the opportunity to write a contrastive Spanish/English grammar for their final paper in which they compare and contrast the following: transitive and intransitive constructions, pronominal system, tense, aspect, verbal inflection, derivational morphology, and two additional areas of their choosing. At the end of the paper, students write a reflective summary focusing on what they have learned about their heritage language and English grammar through their contrastive analysis. I have extended this option to students who speak any heritage language and to date have received papers on Spanish and Portuguese. This assignment gives students who are required to take Modern English Grammar but do not speak English at home the chance to systematically perform on their heritage language the same types of linguistic analysis the course has systematically performed on English. Students have commented that this assignment is challenging and time consuming, but also that it changed the way they think about their heritage language. Needless to say, students must review core English grammatical constructs to contrast it with their heritage language, a process that reinforces course content.

The last final project assignment is team-based and allows students to create a podcast focusing on English or Spanglish in Miami. Students conduct original fieldwork, which includes interviewing speakers to collect the language forms of interest and, perhaps, metalinguistic commentary about local forms of language. I also encourage students to interview experts (e.g., linguists, anthropologists, historians) to provide background material for
their podcast. After recordings have been made, a scripting component requires students to write out and organize the whole podcast, including their own commentary, which should cite the relevant literature and the portions of their interviews they plan to use. Teams then produce a final version, intermingling music, interviews, and read text. This past semester, two teams submitted podcasts for their final projects, one focusing on grammatical variation in Miami Latino English and another on the grammar of Spanish/English code-switching in Miami. I direct readers interested in incorporating podcasting into their own teaching to www.baltimorelanguage.com/podcasts, which features four student-produced podcasts on language variation in Baltimore. One of the podcasts, which focuses on the use of *hun* in Baltimore speech, was featured in *American Speech* (Britton and Faust 2012). Readers should be aware that students will need a lot of time to prepare their podcasts; I therefore recommend disseminating project guidelines as early in the semester as possible.

**Feedback.** The feedback I have received on this course through student evaluations over the past two years has been more positive than for any course I have ever taught, which is remarkable given the topic and the “required” nature of the course. I attribute the enthusiasm for the course to the format (team-based with i-clickers) and to the approach (dynamic, historicized, variable grammar). “Not what I expected” is perhaps the most common comment on student evaluations, which is positive in light of the well-known reality that most students expect a less than positive experience in this course. “Dread” was the word a colleague used to describe how students feel about the course when I volunteered to teach it the first time over two years ago. Many students have alluded to this being “the best course” they have taken in college, which is noteworthy given that I myself found the course to be dry and at times unnecessary before I reimagined it. The following comment on the team-based approach is fairly representative of comments having to do with that aspect of the course:

In the beginning of the semester, I hated the teams and couldn’t understand why we were being forced to work together. Now I can’t imagine taking this class in any other way. I feel that we were able to tutor each other and that we really learned from each other.

Semester after semester, students have been satisfied with the method of delivery (“team-based learning”) and the approach to the topic (e.g., a nonstatic view of English grammar that balances traditional content with an emphasis on variation and change). The only recurring negative feedback about the course is that it covers too much material.
CONCLUSION. I have discovered over the past two years of teaching this course in south Florida that many of my students harbor very negative attitudes about nearly every variety of language found in the local speech communities, including local varieties of Spanish, “Spanglish,” and local varieties of English, including those spoken by “native” English speakers. These attitudes seem to hang on the ways in which success gets imagined in Miami, not only by Latinos, but also by African Americans, Anglo whites, Haitians, Barbadians, Jamaicans, and other ethnolinguistic minority groups who make up Miami’s diverse population: upward mobility through becoming “unaccented” English speakers. In short, language ideology runs very deep in south Florida. Thus, I am very pleased to have been given the opportunity to transform Modern English Grammar into a useful, productive, interesting course that students want to attend and to avoid teaching a course that may subtly underwrite some of the negative beliefs local students hold about language and language variation. As I see it, the iteration of Modern English Grammar I have described here gives students both a solid look at the nuts and bolts of English grammar at the same time that it gives them what is more than likely to be the only chance to study their home language varieties in a university environment. That we can do this while also confronting harmful language ideologies that stigmatize myriad local ways of talking is, for me, a sign of a successful course.

NOTES

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their incisive feedback on this article. I would also like to express my most extreme gratitude to Leslie Richardson and Isis Arzé from FIU’s Center for the Advancement of Teaching for inspiring much of what was written here and for introducing me to many of the specific concepts described, including Team-Based Learning and i-clickers.

1. Space limitations prevent me from outlining the entire course here, but readers can contact me directly for a copy of the syllabus and other resources described here.

2. Topics covered in this part of the course include morphemes, words, and syllables; word formation processes; inflectional morphemes; derivational morphemes; Spanish/English morphological contrast; form-class words; structure-class words, especially determiners, pronouns, prepositions, prepositions versus phrasal verb particles, auxiliaries, etc.; subjects and predicates; main verb phrase and complements; modals; transitive, intransitive, and linking; tense and aspect; subordination; relative clauses; adverb clauses; adjective clauses

3. Readers interested in learning more about Team-Based Learning can visit http://www.teambasedlearning.org.
Some students anticipate having difficulty explaining the value of their lesson plans to colleagues, finding class time in a heavily prefabricated curriculum, and responding to parents who may disagree with the approach.

REFERENCES


PHILLIP M. CARTER (Ph.D., Duke University) is a sociolinguist and scholar of language and culture in U.S. Latina/o communities. He works interdisciplinarily, moving between quantitative and qualitative approaches to sociolinguistics, anthropology, critical discourse analysis, ethnography, social psychology, Latina/o studies, and critical theory. His scholarship addresses a range of issues of contemporary concern, including the relationship between social formations and linguistic variation, immigration and bilingualism, Spanish/English contact, maintenance and shift of Spanish in the United States, and popular discourses about language. E-mail: pmcarter@fiu.edu.

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EDUCATING THE EDUCATED: LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE UNIVERSITY BACKYARD

STEPHANY BRETT DUNSTAN, WALT WOLFRAM, ANDREY J. JAEGER, and REBECCA E. CRANDALL

North Carolina State University

In higher education, the term *diversity* includes a wide range of cultural and individual lifestyles and behaviors, and most universities have instituted programs to promote diversity. Although these efforts extend to a range of groups—such as those characterized by race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, gender, and so on—they rarely address language variation, which can index all of those characteristics (Lippi-Green 2012). Studies show that speakers of nonmainstream English on college campuses may feel marginalized and devalued (Dunstan 2013; Dunstan and Jaeger, forthcoming). Dunstan’s (2013) study, for example, found that a range of behaviors—including class participation, perceptions of intelligence by professors and other students, and to an extent, a sense of belonging on campus—was affected by students’ use of a variety of Appalachian English, or “mountain speech.” Furthermore, these behaviors did not necessarily align with traditional sociopolitical ideologies found in different fields; the social studies and humanities, in fact, were perceived by some students as less tolerant of language variation than disciplines such as economics or the physical sciences. At the same time, incipient studies on dialect diversity education suggest that participation in programs specifically targeting language diver-