

Rewriting Teaching and Learning Narratives: How to Promote Student Embrace of Language Varieties

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Abstract:

Focusing on two international, albeit differently globalized languages, the authors explore a nexus of culture and observed discourse practice still too often neglected in the second- and foreign-language classroom, to wit, the thoughtful presentation and promotion of dialectal and sociolectal varieties of French and English. Their pedagogy encourages the integration of variations as part and parcel of the language study syllabus, rather than as tangential curiosities relegated to discretized vignettes. In this article, sample lessons from an advanced-level French language course and a first-year writing course in English are presented that home in on variational qualities deemed culturally pertinent in each linguistic sphere. In the French lesson, for example, students are invited to explore variation based on cultural concerns for surface structure through an activity on terminological innovation and the creation of properly “French” lexical items. The English critical writing assignment, in turn, comprises weekly discussion board posts in which students respond to garden-path prompts that ask them to react to both received ideas as well as research findings about varieties of world English(es). Students are required to draw on sundry wells of scholarship and experience, including their own linguistic trajectories and multilingual identities. The sample exercises outlined by the authors are but two among many utilized in their respective courses designed to make the conscious examination of variety and language (re)appropriation an integral part of course cultural content.

Keywords: ESL; EFL; FLE; Language Variation; Linguaculture

Despite lip service to the contrary, and repeated calls for global approaches to international languages, the teaching of English and French is still largely the teaching of prestigious and deceptively stable “Standards,” to wit, Standard American, Standard British English, Parisian French, prestige language varieties that “have always been the perfect instrument[s] of empire” (Antonio de Nebrija). As the linguistic legacies of past imperial interests, the Standards have established centers to which all non-standard varieties are seen as peripheries. Their legacies live

on today because both students and teachers of these two global languages continue to see Standard varieties as “correct” and other varieties as “incorrect” (Chavoshan et al.) when recounting and narrating their individual and collective teaching and learning trajectories. These ever-evolving “narratives” include, of course, a language learner’s and/or language practitioner’s history that have begotten present beliefs as well as projections about likely future views and positions about how language(s) and their varieties work in the world and what they represent as media of thought and idea exchange.

While knowledge and command of contemporary Standards and pedagogical norms remain important for student success (Magnan and Walz), familiarity with languages as they are used is critical to mastering the complexities of both written and spoken discourse. For example, students of French who learn only bourgeois Parisian French norms of pronunciation may have a harder time understanding the spoken French of the Americas or West Africa. Likewise, students who are only exposed to Standard American or British English are less likely to embrace world Englishes and how their various manifestations express culture(s), histories, legacies and outlooks. If, however, French and English language teachers can include, as a matter of course, variation in language, they can help their students become better multilinguals because they can make deeper comparisons in and to the languages and varieties they already speak. Indeed, students of French and English can and will learn these languages, and their diverse linguacultures, as they will experience them in an ever more globalized world (Matsuda). Moreover, they will also observe explicitly, rather than merely peripherally, that variation is, in fact, the norm in all linguistic communities. Drawing their attention to this natural patterning will hopefully push students and teachers alike to accommodate and “rewrite” what they experience

through explicit instruction into their continually developing and ever-more sophisticated learning and teaching narratives.

In what follows, the authors present examples from classes taught at their respective institutions that illustrate how variation can be promoted to enhance both linguistic and cultural competence in Frenches and Englishes and help students and teachers rewrite their narratives. Indeed, providing concrete examples of how received ideas can be deracinated, and why they should be, inevitably encourage students and instructors to think critically about the role of language varieties. Moreover, it can debunk common student (mis)perceptions and the subsequent narratives they advance regarding the supposed incorrectness of varieties. Each pedagogical example will begin by describing the teaching context of the course followed by a sample assignment.

Teaching Context I: Varieties of World French(es)

When and how should students be introduced to language variation? While it is important that pedagogical norms be taken into consideration (Magnan and Walz) to provide learners the most useful discourse practices (Young) and the structures that undergird them, drawing attention to variants from the beginning, be they geographic, social, or pragmatic, prepares students to be more open to the variations they will inevitably encounter in real world language use situations. Of course, which variants to include, and how they ought to be approached, will depend largely on the teaching and learning macro- and micro-context. For example, anglophone learners in the American macro-context may mark variants differently than their homologues in eastern Canada where English-speaking students come into direct contact with speakers of Canadian French varieties. Parisian French norms are typically more unmarked in the former context and more marked to a greater or lesser degree, depending on micro-context, in the latter. In the *Varieties of*

World French(es) course, we consider the English-dominant context of an American university classroom and how French may be presented as a global language used by many different polities as a vehicle for sundry cultural products, practices and perspectives.

Varieties of World French(es) is an upper intermediate to lower advanced-level French-medium course that is taken mainly by French majors toward the end of their tenure as undergraduates. It is, however, open to any student with B2-level (or approximately Advanced Low to Advanced Mid on the ACTFL scale) French competence and usually enrolls between 10 and 12 students when offered. The glossonym in the singular and (plural) in the course's title emphasizes the fact that French is both "one in many" and "many in one."

Students most often come to the class having only studied the Standard Parisian-derived pedagogical norm. Any exposure to varieties other than this Standard is typically limited to lexical outliers or oddities presented in piecemeal fashion through cultural vignettes. For example, the names of meals in French Canada or the numerals used in Belgium, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Switzerland may be mentioned in passing when students learn about the French-speaking populations of these countries. To get beyond presenting variation as a peripheral addition to French language study, *Varieties of World French(es)* works through the five goal areas of ACTFL's World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, to wit, communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities, but with particular attention to the comparisons goal area. In the course this emphasis on comparisons is further considered through an extended model proposed by Kate Douglass and Lawrence Williams, authors who have proposed a "unique perspective on the Comparisons goal area because the focus is not primarily on comparing a second (L2) and a first language (L1) or second (C2) and a first culture (C1)." Their model "highlight[s] the importance of studying variation within a

single language/culture, a dimension of language learning that is missing from the Standards” (55).

Inspired by Douglass and Williams’ model, the *Varieties* course focuses on comparison(s) among variations and the place of reference French the students have learned upon enrolling in the *Varieties* course. We have slightly modified the notion of “single language/culture” that considers French as an umbrella term for all mutually intelligible varieties whose users claim to speak “French,” and takes account of the many cultures that think and communicate through the sundry versions of French-identified codes. As we tour French-speaking spaces, then, be they geographic, social, or virtual, students are invited to examine what phonetic, lexical, and grammatical variations exist and why, and perhaps more importantly, to observe how these differences evince cultural distinctions among the many Francophones in the world.

Coursework throughout the semester includes reading and listening to French(es) from around the globe as well as from diverse social milieus, comparing similarities and differences among them, and placing varieties in their historical and contemporary contexts. In what follows, one sample assignment is described, however, that places students in an “applied variety” role, something well known in the ever puristic French-speaking world: that of language planner or *terminologist*.

Meaningful Assignment I: Applied Variety

About 25 years ago, just after the now cult classic film *Office Space* (1999) came out, my French students asked how we might translate the line “Uh oh, sounds like somebody’s got a case of the Mondays.” Unfortunately, we did not have access to any French language tracks or subtitles that may have been used at the time, so we took it upon ourselves to come up with a good translation. After some informal discussion, several students proposed: “Oh là là, i(l) paraît que quelqu’un

souffre du lundicite!” The most interesting part of the translation is the proposition of a neologism *lundicite*, which makes use of *lundi* as a base and a suffix, *ite*, albeit with an inserted consonant, *c* = /s/ to facilitate pronunciation and to draw parallels with the many nouns in *ite* whose base formatives end in *c* or its allomorphs, to denote an illness pertaining to, or stemming from the base, akin to English *(c)itis*.

Our search for an appropriate gallicization to avoid a borrowing replicated partially *in vitro* what actual terminologists in France and Quebec are famous for doing *in vivo*, that is, proposing to francophone users nativized alternatives to English borrowings. We thus created lexical variety that would respect the formation processes found elsewhere in the French word stock (knowing that the to-be-avoided anglicisms are virtually always successfully implanted) and that would result in the creation of two parallel denominations for a single notion, typically within the same social register, hence the veritable *creation of variation*.

The above example from popular culture has since inspired a week-long collective assignment in the present *Varieties* course that takes place at the end of the semester. After having studied the more traditional “lects,” i.e., geolects, dialects, and sociolects as a means of organizing the characteristics that mark varieties, the course pivots to an area very particular to French language variation, and the linguistic culture it bespeaks, that is, *applied variation* through corpus language planning. The *Académie française* and the *Office québécois de la langue française* regularly propose proper French terms or so-called “anti-anglicisms” (Ball and Marley). The ever-increasing influence of English as the undisputed international language, and thus as the code in and through which most innovation is exported and explained, means that new anglicisms of various types (phonetic, graphic, lexical, and syntactic) are continually borrowed into French. To counter this trend, the language planning entities above coin “native”

equivalents, some of which succeed their implantation and some of which fail. The motivation behind terminological propositions and the where, when, why, and how such terms succeed or fail, are questions that both fascinate and amuse students of French. The terminological or applied varieties assignment described below gives students a way of seeing in real time how the planning, diffusion and implantation (may) proceed.

The sample assignment begins with students reading several recent articles on implantation and its measurement. The following class period they are then asked to hypothesize why they think certain terms have succeeded and why others have not. For example, French, and interestingly European Spanish in some varieties, use the coined term *ordinateur* (ordenador) rather than a form of *computer*. This is one famous example of successful proposition, diffusion, and ultimate implantation. Likewise, the term *courriel* and its derivatives have succeeded implantation, at least in part, in the face of *e-mail* or *mail* in some French-speaking communities. Other proposals such as *gaminet* (T-shirt) and “*ranimer la batterie*” (to give a boost [to a car battery]) have largely failed. Students are asked to look at the terms and their English equivalents and offer hypotheses about their success or failure. Once the various hypotheses have been generated, a collective list of factors that either help or hinder adoption is drawn up. Table 1 is typical of what is usually identified as favoring or disfavoring implantation.

Favors Implantation	Examples and Counterexamples
1. economy of proposal (The proposed term is long or shorter than the alternative anglicism.) 2. euphony (The proposed term is easy to pronounce and is deemed pleasant sounding.) 3. vertical fit (The proposed term can be manipulated paradigmatically, and it accepts the accidents of its word class i.e., takes endings, prefixes and suffixes.) 4. horizontal fit (The proposed term can be seen as part of a classified vocabulary family and is seen to harmonize with related terms in each discourse context, i.e., <i>courriel</i> , <i>pourriel</i> and <i>pollurriel</i> work well together in the context of electronic communications. It also accepts usual cooccurrences, like <i>envoyer un courriel</i> .)	1. ranimer la batterie (booster) 2. courriel (2 syllables) 3. courrieller 4. logiciel, didacticiel, espioniciel, etc.

Table 1. Sample list of term qualities

Of course, it is not always easy to see why terms succeed or fail. This is perhaps ever truer as more and more French speakers in the Americas and around the world continue to master English.

Following the hypothesis period, students are given lists of English technical or recent popular terms from various disciplines and are asked to propose *francisations* or properly French equivalents deemed likely to succeed their implantation. It is important that the terms chosen for replacement have not already been the subject of official translations. The students are then asked to follow the steps in table 2 below, coining French terms inspired by the *démarche*

terminologique proposed by Rondeau which insists that the notion (signifié) be the starting point for any coinages.

Directions	Gloss
1. Analysez les termes anglo-américains et vérifiez les significations à l'aide d'un dictionnaire unilingue anglais.	1. Analyze the American English terms and check their meanings in an English monolingual dictionary.
2. Quelle(s) partie(s) du discours est (sont) représentée(s) ?	2. What part of speech do they represent?
3. Les termes sont-ils faciles à prononcer ? Si oui, pourquoi? Sinon, pourquoi pas ?	3. Are the terms easy to pronounce? If yes, why? If no, why not?
4. Calculez le nombre de syllabes dans chaque dénomination.	4. Count the number of syllables in each term.
5. Combien y a-t-il de morphèmes dans chaque terme? De quelle(s) sorte(s) de morphèmes s'agit-il ?	5. How many morphemes are there in each term? What type(s) of morphemes are they?
6. En tenant compte de toutes ces caractéristiques, proposez des francisations qui partagent les mêmes traits que les termes anglais. Assurez-vous que vos propositions respectent la morphosyntaxe française.	6. Considering all these characteristics, propose properly French terms that share these same qualities. Be sure that your proposals respect French morphosyntax.

Table 2. Guidelines for term proposals

Students prepare their propositions and then share them with the class. Their peers then say whether they would consider using such *francisations* in their spoken or written French and why or why not. The presentation of the proposed new words wraps up a week-long focus on corpus planning and its sociolinguistics. In addition, the assignment brings a greater awareness to French derivational morphology and circumlocution all while being culturally relevant for French language learners.

Teaching Context II: What Is English?

Writing as Critical Inquiry: What Is English? is a first-year university-level writing course that focuses on honing students' critical inquiry skills. One important objective of the course is to help build or hone students' writing skills with the aim of completing a research paper or a research proposal, depending on the semester. In addition, students spend the first half of the course gaining knowledge on issues surrounding the English language to have the background to enter the conversations through their coursework depending on the semester. The course is capped at 16 students per semester, and the demographics of the students varies semester by semester; however, the class typically consists of students from a wide variety of American and international communities.

In the design of the course, products, practices, and perspectives that allow for both globality, and criticality are considered, inspired by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) National Standards' 3Ps (products, practices, and perspectives). The 3Ps is a cultural framework in which "culture is presented as the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products of a society" (Cutshall). Additionally, supporting global perspectives means providing opportunities for student choice and expertise. The students' lived experiences and knowledge, their multilingual identities, are resources to enhance the design of the course (Canagarajah 2016). And one aspect of supporting global perspectives is acknowledging and creating space for language varieties.

Throughout the semester the inextricable links among languages, cultures, and identities are explored through texts and assignments that focus on historical, conceptual, and critical perspectives of Englishes. These perspectives complicate the concept of English, highlighting colonial legacies, marginalized narratives, and new ways of understanding the language. English is not one language, and it does not have one correct form; English is a larger

category of language that houses many global Englishes (i.e., English varieties) (Canagarajah 2006). The pedagogy used in the course put into practice the content taught and discussed. Diverse forms of participation, writing styles, and language use, are encouraged in the course to challenge traditional standardized classroom practices that do not always reflect the values of the students (Lippi-Green). Students can use English varieties and other global languages in group discussions and assignments for different objectives. For example, the students can use another language that is not Standard American English if every other member of the group shares that language, and the students use Standard American English to share information to the entire class. Students can also use multiple languages in their written assignments as long as the information is translated for clear communication with the professor and peers.

Meaningful Assignment II: Weekly Discussion Boards

Students are required to participate in weekly discussion boards, low-risk writing assignments that provide an interactive space to expand on our conversations in the course. These assignments are accomplished through the university's learning management system. One week, the students choose among the prompt options and are required to respond in 250 words to the prompt. The following week they do not write original posts and respond to at least two classmates in 125 words for each post.

There are obvious benefits to community discussion boards. The low-risk aspect of the assignments tends to free students from their inhibitions regarding writing anxiety and perfectionism. It encourages a different form of class participation that benefits students that are typically less willing to speak out in class. It breaks down writing into manageable chunks, enabling students to accumulate substantial written work without being overwhelmed. By the conclusion of this course they write 2,500 words, engaging in conversation on a variety of topics under the umbrella of the English language. The total word count is close to the same length as

their research paper assignment. And more importantly, the quality of critical thinking is exceptional and prepares them for high-risk assignments like final papers and projects.

In the context of this course, two critical benefits of the weekly forum discussions are that the assignments encourage students to think critically about language varieties and multilingualism, and in turn, multiculturalism, and that they foster student agency by calling on their individual choices and expertise. The students choose from a list of prompt options and can bring their own experiences and knowledge – personal and academic – into their responses. Two examples of discussion post topics and prompts are provided in table 3.

Discussion Topic	Discussion Prompt
Accenting Accents	Roberto Rey Agudo begins his <i>New York Times</i> opinion article with two simple clauses: “I have an accent. So do you.” From this starting point he develops his argument for how accents are stigmatized, fetishized, embraced, revered, and erased. For some, like Rey Agudo, an accent is a part of one’s identity, so it should be embraced. For others, as described in <i>The World</i> report on South Korea, an accent can be both a barrier and passport to success. From these two sources we start to see how the concept of accents helps us to better understand other concepts such as privilege and discrimination. In this post, I want to hear your opinion on accents. What are some of your thoughts about what an “accent” is? Is there a “correct” accent? Who has a “correct” accent? Why are some accents perceived to be better than others? To help you answer these questions, watch the videos below and respond in at least 250 words. This post is due Monday, 11:59pm ET. <i>The New York Times</i> (2020, April 16). Who won the best New York accent contest? [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOBvvrpb8uI <i>Condé Nast Traveler</i> (2019, June 17). 50 people show us their states’ accents [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcxByX6rh24 Since these videos focus on American Englishes, and if you like, you can also write about how accents are perceived in other parts of the

	world. For example, how are the different accents of the different varieties of Arabic perceived? (Moroccan, Lebanese, Egyptian, Jordanian, etc.)
Listening Multilingually	Pick a song from the list below. Listen to the music, read the lyrics, and watch the music video (if possible). Do a little research online and find out more about the artist(s). Think about the role of the English(es) in the song, how it interacts (they interact) with other languages (with each other) in the song, and why the artists use multiple languages. Write a 250-word reflection. Your post is due Monday, 11:59pm ET. (1) Rema and Selena Gomez, “Calm Down” (2023) (Yoruba + Nigerian English + American English) (2) Koffee, “Lockdown” (2022) (Jamaican English + American English) (3) BLACKPINK, “Pink Venom” (2020) (South Korean + American English) (4) Cardi B (feat. Bad Bunny and J Balvin), “I Like It” (2018) (Puerto Rican Spanish + Colombian Spanish + American English) (5) Christine and the Queens, “Paradis Perdue” (2014) (Parisian French + Standard English) (6) Gogol Bordello, “Start Wearing Purple” (2005) (Ukrainian + American English) (7) Céline Dion and Andrea Bocelli, “The Prayer” (1998) (Standard Italian + Standard English) (8) Song of your choice (must be sung in multiple varieties of English or an English and another language). Please give artist name, song title, and include the link to lyrics and music video if possible.

Table 3. Example discussion topics and prompts

The first discussion topic, “Accenting Accents,” allows students to explore their opinion on accent correctness and accent (mis)perceptions. Two texts are assigned for homework for that week – a *New York Times* opinion article by linguist and educator Roberto Rey Agudo entitled “Everyone Has an Accent,” and *The World* podcast “What’s Proper English? In South Korea, It Starts with Sounding American” (Strother). In their responses, students can consider the texts

and class conversations around the English language, in particular, the role accents play in the reverence and derision of cultures and identities.

To guide students to consider accents in different contexts – local and global, regional and national – a New York City accent contest video from the *New York Times* is listed as well. This video provides students with authentic examples of the diversity of accents within New York City and, perhaps, they reflect on the concept of social stratification in New York City explored in William Labov’s work that we have previously discussed in the course. How were borough accents gatekeepers to jobs then? Has the opinion around accent reduction changed? Students also have the option to extend our conversations around English to other languages (e.g., Arabic, Spanish, and Chinese) based on their lived experiences. This option to extend the conversation outside of English provides students with choice, allows them to bring in their own expertise, and adds to the multidimensional perspective on the topic of accents.

The second discussion topic, “Listening Multilingually,” asks students to consider the role of language in popular music. In the prompt, students are asked to think about the role of English(es) in the song, how English interacts with other languages or Englishes in the song, and why the artists may use multiple languages. Eight options are listed in the prompt, offering a range of musical genres (e.g., pop, reggae, rock, opera) and a range of language varieties (e.g., Nigerian English, South Korean, Puerto Rican Spanish). The students also have an option to choose a song not listed by the instructor. In their responses the students may consider the dominance of American English in mainstream music. Is the dominance of American English a threat to other languages in music? Or is it, as *The Economist* suggests, on the decline, in competition with Spanish and Korean? Is American English a tool for global artists hoping to increase their reach? They might also think about how dancehall artists like Koffee can increase

awareness and acceptance around English language varieties such Jamaican English (or Jamaican Patois) through the music despite listeners not always understanding the lyrics (Gardner). Like the previous discussion, the options provided in the assignment extend the conversation outside of English, grant students space to bring in their own expertise, and add to the global perspectives around the topic.

Conclusion

Drawing students' attention to variety in languages, including their own, prepares them not only to recognize the many ways that English and French are used to express cultural and individual identities by their diverse speakers but also to better understand how knowledge of variation can enhance their own linguistic creativity. In the English language assignment, students look at the production of musical artists, and their practice of performance, which includes varieties of world Englishes and often other languages as well. By engaging with the material through the posts they write, they gain, and beget themselves, new perspectives about the songs and their possible reception(s).

In the French language assignment, students are invited to create variety in the French word stock by coining new terminologies. This culturally particular exercise, however, like the English assignment asks them to compare two languages (English and French) while at the same time looking at comparison within one language (French) that is cultivating parallel vocabularies, one set from English and one set from internal sources. Indeed, despite the prestige associated with the abstraction that is the "Standard" language, focus on real world cognitive and communicative competencies means promoting student embracement of language variation to reroute, yea, rewrite their ongoing learning narratives.

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