Diversifying the field: Activities to make linguistics more relevant

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Abstract. Students find linguistics at times abstract and intimidating and they have a hard time understanding how they can apply what they learn in our classes to the real world and how to relate their cultural/community experiences to it. As a consequence, we inadvertently restrict the pool of linguistic students. Inspired by work done by Charity Hudley et al. (2017), Trester (2017), Chávez & Longerbeam (2016), and by my personal experiences, I created a series of activities for my introduction to linguistics and syntax courses to respond to this problem. I offer some suggestions on how to make our linguistics courses more practical and relatable to our students, in particular first-generation students. The long-term goal is to organically engage and retain a diverse pool of students, thus enriching our field with their perspectives. We can achieve this goal by balancing teaching practices across cultural frameworks.

Keywords. pedagogy; linguistic teaching; cultural frameworks; first generation; integrated framework

1. Cultural frameworks. If we want to make linguistics a more diverse field, we need to present and teach the content of our classes in a way that engages students and is inclusive of all their learning cultures (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). As an instructor, I want to engage students who normally do not gravitate towards our field, those who did not know what linguistics was or how much they might enjoy it. In particular, I want to center our conversation on first generation students in the field of linguistics, as this is a group that encompasses a variety of ethnicities, social classes and nationalities, yet is rarely discussed in our field.

Our educational system and the field of linguistics more specifically, is based on the assumption that our students share the same cultural capital when they come to college. Moreover, the cultural capital that most often is assumed is Northern-European (Ibarra 2001, Rendón 2009, Chávez et al. 2012), where the individual is centered in the discourse, linear reasoning is centralized, knowledge is compartmentalized, and it is independent from context (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). These characteristics are what define an individuated cultural framework, which is the dominant academic culture in the US (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016), but it is by no means the only academic culture possible. Not all students are from the dominant academic culture; this is true especially of first-generation, low-income, children of immigrants, Indigenous students, and other underserved populations.

As instructors, we can choose to reflect and implement teaching practices that draw from cultural strengths that our students bring with them (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). We want to aim for a mix of teaching techniques that are familiar and unfamiliar to students, thus supporting and challenging them at the same time. Since students come in with different

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cultural norms, reflecting and being aware of them will allow us to make the learning environment more inclusive and effective.

In this paper, I introduce the Cultural Frameworks in Teaching and Learning model (Chávez et al. 2012, Ke & Chávez 2013, Chávez & Longerbeam 2016) and I propose that to demystify our field for students, to help them navigate the hidden curriculum in academia, and to include everyone's perspective and cultural strengths, we need to balance cultural frameworks. The two frameworks that we should be balancing are the individuated cultural framework and the integrated framework (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). The integrated cultural framework, less common in academic cultures, valorizes a view of the world that is interconnected, mutual, circular or seasonal, reflective, contextually dependent, and one which is based on mind/body/spirit/heart (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). Implementing an integrated framework in teaching means that students would be able to apply their ways of learning in their upbringing to their learning in college. Since the integrated framework is less commonly present in college, the students who belong to it face an additional challenge to their learning: the negotiation between their culture of origin and the individuated (dominant) culture.

In this paper I discuss some possible ways to modify pedagogical decisions, assignments and evaluations to strive towards a balance between the two cultural frameworks. Because of the limitation in space, I will offer examples that are mostly framed within the integrated framework and I will assume that our default system is based on the individuated framework (even when we are not part of that framework ourselves; if we are reading this paper, we have been taught to be). My suggestions do not entail major changes in the content of our classes, but they ask for cultural introspection of our own teaching practices and of the way we understand/interact with our students' culture.

2. In class activities. The following is a non-comprehensive list of content related suggestions and activities that I have experimented with in the classroom in order to implement the integrated framework in my teaching. I teach in a Minority-Serving and Hispanic-Serving Institution where more than half of the students are first generation. I want to emphasize though that any institution would benefit from instructors aware of both frameworks and that we are dealing with a continuum between the two, not a dichotomy.

Content wise, especially when it comes to introduction to linguistics, we need to diversify our syllabi (Calhoun et al. 2021, Truong 2021). In my semester-long introduction to linguistics, we cover the usual foundations; however, we also have raciolinguistics, language and music, teaching linguistics in k-12, language revitalization and reclamation, second language acquisition, heritage language speakers and their languages. These are my students' favorite topics, which helped them to ground their knowledge in their own experience, as they wrote to me. I believe that some of these topics could be modified depending on the student population and their preferences. An important part of the diversification is in choosing materials that are not solely academic in nature like theoretical linguistics journal articles and textbook chapters.[1]

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[1] I used readings from the Atlantic, podcasts like "Lingthusiasm" (Gawne & McCulloch 2016); videos as the "Ling Space" (Lieberman 2014); documentaries like "Chiflidos en la neblina" (Sicoli 2013), "Signing Black in America" (Hutcheson & Cullinan 2020), "Crash Course" Linguistics (Gawne et al. 2020); short videos about the balafon (Diabate 2019); journal articles to talk about teaching linguistics to K12 students (Denham 2007,

I also include how our learning relates to the job market for two reasons. The first reason is to help our students understand what they can do with a BA in linguistics and how to transfer some of the skills that they are learning into jobs even outside of linguistics.[2] This information allows the students to talk with their families and friends about the applicability of what they learn (beyond research) and to demystify our field for everyone involved in this conversation. Students belonging to an integrated framework are interested in how their knowledge can benefit their communities of origin (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016).

Activities wise, I would recommend reflection papers and real-final projects. Reflection papers are short responses to questions that guide the students in reflecting, at a metalinguistics level, about the content that they are learning. I used them in alternation with traditional problem sets, in both introduction to linguistics and syntax. These papers facilitate participation and engagement for those students who come from cultures which valorize internal processing. They encourage students to focus on emotions related to the content of the class in light of their lived experiences (Chávez & Longerbeam 2016). The first of these reflection papers in my classes is usually a linguistic autobiography, where the students are asked to reflect on their own experience and relationship with language. This paper allows the students to start thinking at a deeper level about the content of the course, and it quickly demonstrates the integrated approach of the course. I recommend that the instructor also writes their own linguistic autobiography and shares it with their students, as it connects and grounds us, and makes us more approachable. Finally, the reflection papers are also a great assessment tool, as you can give one at the beginning and at the end of the course, with questions that help the students to reflect on their semester-long journey, what they have learned and what are some of the skills that they can use in the real world. This evaluative technique allows both us and the students to reflect and be aware of culture frameworks.

In the real-final project, I asked students to teach or talk about a specific topic to someone who is not from the field of linguistics, and they can choose to do so in a video format, audio format, or a paper. The main idea behind teaching someone who is not from the field, is that it helps them to simplify the ideas and to communicate them to non-linguists. This activity allows the creation of personal connections and the use of multiple means of assessment, two points that facilitate all students' cultural strengths.

In addition to what I have listed, in this same volume there are other recommendations for first-generation students. In particular, Truong (2021) describes how we can demystify academia and research for our students, with a major focus on how to prepare a presentation for a conference. Welch (2021) offers students help in understanding what to do to succeed in college through gamification.

All of the activities I have listed contain a few important components that we need to reflect upon so as to demystify our field and introduce it to our students in a culturally relevant way. It is important to note that they always contain a relational portion which allows for metareflection and the ability to connect the concepts learned in class to their life outside of linguistics and to their own communities/values. None of these techniques lower

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Larson et al. 2019). Read also Anderson et al. (2021) about podcasting as a tool for teaching, outreach and justice in linguistics.

[2]To this point, I have also created a skill-based teaching approach of syntax, inspired by Zuraw et al. (2019); however, I will leave the discussion of that effort for future research, as it deserves a more in depth commentary.

the rigor of our classes, nor do they detract from the content of the "traditional" information learned.

3. Discussion. The pedagogical approach I used in these two classes was effective, based on informal observations from students and their reflection papers on their experiences. At the time of implementing the changes to my curriculum I did not set up to collect quantitative data; I hope to be able to do so more carefully in the future, especially once we are no longer in a pandemic. However, based on what the students have said, some of my objectives were achieved. Students reported having a clearer understanding of the subject of linguistics and they expressed their joy about being able to relate linguistics to their communities and families. Lessons about topics such as music, raciolinguistics, and second languages acquisition (among others) gave them topics they and their community could relate to experientially (Hooks 1994). The use of reflection papers also helped the students to connect topics that they were acquiring to their existing knowledge in a multitude of ways, and they also helped students to more clearly articulate their thoughts. The comments below were taken from some of the final reflection papers, where students were asked to reflect upon the semester and what they had learned in the class.

"…Through this course I have been able to open up and not only learn myself but also incorporate some of the topics I have learned through out this course with my students and colleagues. I learned more about myself and the language I grew up with…"
"…I will apply these concepts when I interact with family members or friends in the real world…"
"…I learned a lot this semester from this class, things that I have dealt with throughout my life but never fully understood until I read through the lessons in this class…"

What this first semester has demonstrated to me is that this approach can be implemented without major changes in the curriculum or in the content of our syllabi.

Another positive from my experience was that the reflection papers helped to create a communication tool for the students which was especially useful in a class like syntax which can be intimidating. By asking students to ask me a question in their papers, students that normally would not communicate their frustrations and struggles with the material start feeling more connected and less intimidated.

Finally, giving the students the possibility of creating projects that use a variety of mediums, rather than either an exam or a paper, could give birth to unexpected and creative ideas. Moreover, in so doing, we are giving the students the opportunity to express themselves, and to show us a higher level of engagement with the material.

In the future, I would like to improve the real-final project. Post-pandemic, I will make the real-final project obligatory, as only a small portion of students opted for it; I also plan on offering some alternative medium for the other homework as well, in order to build towards the multimodality of the final project. I have yet to integrate all the components of an integrated framework; however, from the results obtained in my classes thus far, I can confirm that the level of engagement has improved in comparison to traditional classes. I look forward to offering an in depth report in the near future.

My teaching approach is informed by and feeds into a broader contribution to Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI). This approach to the teaching of linguistics is based on the need of centering all students' experiences and the creation of a learning environment free from the typical assumptions made about the culture of learning students "ought to" be coming to the classroom with. As such, it aims to be inclusive of a diverse student body and

to make the experience of first-generation students and of students who are not coming from an individualistic culture as important as the most common Northern-European culture. Hence, leveling the interest in the field should allow the learning experience to become more equitable and just. An intended consequence of this approach is the possibility of enticing students who otherwise might not have known about or been interested in our field in continuing their learning of linguistics. Additionally, this may lead to retaining them in our classes, and the reshaping of our field, thus changing the way our field works.

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