

Engaging with linguistic justice through objectives-based learning and independent research

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Abstract. How can we foster the learner investment required for difficult, reflexive discussions about linguistic justice? We address this question through our efforts as instructors in a general education course on language in the US. To help students reflect on their own positionality within systems of oppression, we nurtured student-instructor relationships where students felt respected, valued, and capable of success using objectives-based assessment strategies and structured independent research projects. Students' positive feedback and focus on LEARNING over simply earning a grade demonstrate the efficacy of our approach.

Keywords. assessment; grading; undergraduate courses; objectives-based grading; learner investment; linguistic justice

1. Course overview & goals. In this paper, we¹ report on the implementation and outcomes of using objectives-based assessment strategies (Feldman 2019, Zuraw et al. 2019) and structured independent research projects (Harapniuk et al. 2018) in an undergraduate course on language in the US. Using these strategies, we as instructors sought to create an environment where students felt respected, valued, and capable of success, resulting in increased LEARNER INVESTMENT (Norton Peirce 1995). We focus here on *Linguistics 155AC: Language in the US*, an introductory course (with no prerequisites) for undergraduates at the University of California, Berkeley. This course examines language and social structures (including race, gender, and class) in what is now known as the US. It also fulfills Berkeley's American Cultures requirement, which stipulates that all students must take at least one course which "introduce[s] students to the diverse cultures of the United States through a comparative framework" (UC Regents 2021). This course requires students to engage with subjects that may be difficult, to reflect on their own positions within systems of oppression, and to interact with one another compassionately. While relationships between and among students and course staff and a robust sense of learner investment are always important, they were all the more crucial in this context.

In 2020, we taught a group of 41 students from a variety of majors in an intensive six-week summer course. Synchronous virtual sessions were held two hours per day. On Mondays through Thursdays, students met with Julia Nee for course lecture and discussion; on Friday discussion sections, students met with Emily Ramirez to cover research methods and development of their final research projects. Emily was added as a second instructor in response

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¹ The authors of this paper, Julia and Emily, are both PhD candidates in Linguistics at UC Berkeley as of the time of writing. Julia is a settler colonial woman of Irish descent who was raised near Chicago, and her research focuses on language revitalization in Mexico. Emily is a Cuban American, multiethnic woman who was raised near Houston; she studies the relationship between social identity and speech perception in varieties of English experimentally and computationally. As instructors, we openly shared our personal and research experiences as was relevant to the course.

to challenges of switching the course to remote instruction due to COVID-19. Students were asked to submit LEARNING OBJECTIVES on a near-daily basis, which were reviewed by Julia. These learning objectives (see section 2.1) could take a variety of formats (short written responses, audio/video recordings, discussion posts) depending on how the individual student felt most comfortable demonstrating their mastery of the objective. Furthermore, we observed flexible due dates, allowing students to submit assignments as long as instructors had time to provide feedback before the end of the course.² Students were allowed (and encouraged) to resubmit assignments multiple times. Julia gave feedback on each submission and invited students to reflect, revise, and resubmit assignments as they refined their understanding of the objectives. In addition to these near-daily assignments, students worked towards the creation of an independent research project (see section 2.2) that synthesized course material along with students' own experiences and expertise. These projects were scaffolded through milestone assignments that provided students with an opportunity to receive peer and instructor feedback as they built their final projects. Emily provided all formal feedback on project-related work.³

Our course goals included allowing students to participate sincerely and constructively throughout the course to develop robust investment as learners (Norton Peirce 1995). We hoped that students would come to view the assignments not as exercises with right or wrong answers, but instead as opportunities to construct new knowledge. Furthermore, we promoted interrogation of the way that value is assigned to different types of knowledge, including reflection on students' own positions within systems of oppression.⁴ In summer 2020, this critical outlook was particularly important, as students were not only learning about (in)justice through our course, but also through their lived experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and movements for social justice.⁵ Most importantly, we hoped that work in the classroom would provide students with skills that they could use to contextualize these current issues and contribute to efforts that further social justice. By centering equity in the design of the course and demonstrating interest in students' identities and perspectives, we developed positive student-instructor relationships, enhanced learners' investment, and improved learning outcomes.

2. Fostering learner investment and educational equity. One concern that we had when designing and implementing this course was how we would be able to promote equity among our students—particularly under the circumstances named above. We followed recommendations for best practices from Feldman (2019). All assessments were formative (that is, they provided data that students could use to further their learning). Furthermore, we made MISTAKES a central part of the learning process by encouraging students to review feedback and revise their

² Students were encouraged to touch base with instructors if they had a large quantity of outstanding assignments, and Julia reached out to students with outstanding assignments at the end of each course module (approximately every two weeks). We worked together to create an assignment completion plan that would get each student back on track to complete their coursework by the end of the term.

³ Instructional labor was divided based on both hourly appointments and expertise, with Julia as the course instructor and Emily as an hourly Graduate Student Instructor (TA). Julia's research on language and language policy in the Americas, and Emily's experience with undergraduate research mentoring made each of us particularly suited for our role.

⁴ See Montoya (2020) for a discussion of why critical self-reflection on our positionality as researchers is crucial in the social sciences, and in linguistics specifically.

⁵ In particular, heightened visibility of systemic violence against Black people led to active protests from movements including Black Lives Matter. Anti-Asian violence was also salient to students alongside racist rhetoric around the origins of COVID-19.

submissions. This in turn lowered the stakes of any single assessment, encouraged progress no matter the starting point, and reduced fear of failure. Moreover, this process of iteratively revising and resubmitting parallels the research process more authentically. Finally, grading was transparent and designed to reflect only student mastery. By removing factors such as participation and timeliness, we made the grades more robust to circumstances beyond students' control (which, for example, might force them to miss class or assignment deadlines) and ameliorated the effect of situational inequities on students' grades.

By centering equity in the design of assignments and assessment, we also sought to strengthen student-instructor relationships and deepen LEARNER INVESTMENT (Norton Peirce 1995, Pavlenko 2001, Darvin & Norton 2015). Learner investment focuses on the social aspects of learning by recognizing that learners are affected by complex “socially and historically constructed and dynamic” relationships to the material they are learning and the environment they are learning it in (Pavlenko 2001, p. 294).⁶ As Norton (2019) notes, “A student may be highly motivated, but if the classroom practices are racist, sexist, or homophobic, for example, the learner may have little investment...and demonstrate little progress” (p. 303). Instead, students become more invested and achieve greater learning outcomes when their identities are honored. In the context of summer 2020, this especially included honoring the identities of students who—in their roles as caregivers, workers, and activists, for example—were particularly affected by situational factors beyond the course. Traditional grading with strict deadlines and points associated with “effort” or “participation” unfairly penalizes the same students who are likely already facing other challenges. Objectives-based learning, on the other hand, reduces situational inequities by giving all students a chance to be assessed ONLY on their demonstration of the skills and knowledge described in the course objectives. To echo Norton (2019), if the classroom practices are classist (such as by valuing “effort” via amount of time invested, regardless of whether or not the student has other financial obligations) or racist and sexist (such as by valuing “participation” via the norms of typical participation by white men), students may not be invested. In contrast, when situational and identity-based inequities are reduced and students feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to the classroom, investment—and in turn learning outcomes—should improve. In the next two subsections, we provide examples of how students completed objectives-based assignments and independent research. In section 3 we show how these approaches deepened student-instructor relationships and enhanced learner investment.

2.1. OBJECTIVES-BASED ASSIGNMENTS. Each objectives-based assignment provided students with a learning objective, such as “explore how language revitalization and reclamation projects contest, incorporate, and leverage colonial structures in the US” or “define and provide examples of pidgins and creoles spoken in the US and the social situations in which they were formed.” Students were invited to respond to this assignment in whatever way felt productive for them (via text, speech, or video), and were given targeted feedback on their submission. These submissions were also assigned a letter grade following the rubric in table 1.⁷

To demonstrate what this model of assessment looks like in action, consider the objective

⁶ While the concept of learner investment was developed in the context of language learning, we believe that it is also useful in wider contexts of learning.

⁷ Because Canvas, our learning management system, required letter grades to be associated with numeric values, we did so, attempting to follow the scheme in table 1 so that the average calculated by Canvas would reflect the principle that a student with mostly As should receive an overall grade of A, mostly Bs a B, half As and half Cs a B, etc.

Grade	Score	Description
A	95%	Demonstrates full acquisition of the objective and application in a novel context.
B	85%	Demonstrates full acquisition of the objective.
C	75%	Demonstrates partial acquisition of the objective.
D	65%	Does not yet demonstrate acquisition of the objective.
F	55%	Does not yet provide evidence to determine acquisition of the objective.

Table 1. Grading rubric for objectives-based assignments in *Language in the US*, summer 2020

“Explain the socially constructed nature of the concept of race in America by examining how individuals may be classified by others as belonging to different ‘races’ depending on the social context.” One student responded to this by incorporating several sources explored in the course: an online exhibit from the Tlacolulokos art collective (Canul & Cernas 2020), considerations from Garrett et al. (2019) on the relationship between UC Berkeley and Indigenous peoples, and insights from course lectures on research ethics. However, the student did not discuss how race may be considered differently in different contexts, so the submission was assigned a C. In targeted feedback, Julia communicated that a successful response would specifically address how ideas of race have or have not changed over time and space. The revised and resubmitted response earned an A, because it integrated this feedback, providing examples of how racial self-perception can shift. Drawing connections between a guest lecture from UC Berkeley Native American Studies Professor Beth Piatote about her use of English and Nez Perce in her book *The Beadworkers* (2019) and an independent reading of Tommy Orange’s *There There* (2018), the student demonstrated mastery of the objective by identifying a tension between traditionalism and innovation. For characters in Piatote and Orange’s writing, this tension contributes to the dynamic construction of an Indigenous identity, including through language. Ultimately, the result of this targeted feedback was that the student was able to connect ideas from both inside and beyond the class to create a personalized, nuanced reflection on the difficult topic of race and its social construction. The student was given the space to “fail” productively and build on the insights from the original submission to demonstrate a more complete understanding, rather than rejecting them as “wrong.”

2.2. INDEPENDENT RESEARCH. In addition to daily learning objectives, empowering students to conduct independent research was a critical part of achieving course goals. The assignment drew inspiration from the COVA model, which centers the student’s Choice, Ownership, Voice, and Authenticity in project-based learning (Harapniuk et al. 2018). This was a natural fit with both our goals and those of objectives-based learning more broadly. Students chose a personally meaningful topic related to language and social structures. They were encouraged to write about the experiences of a family (or similar social unit) over multiple generations and highlight changes over time. While they were required to reflexively address their own positionality, they were NOT required to focus on their own family. This was important to us, because the personal stakes of engaging with family members or family history are different for different students, and the objective could be achieved whether they engaged with their own family or not. One goal of the capstone assignment was for students to push back against hegemonic and colonial ideas of what sources of information are “scholarly” and “reliable.” To this end, students considered different sources of information and integrated diverse ways of knowing in

their analysis. The “traditional” sociological interview was discussed alongside Indigenous research methods (Smith 2012). To ensure students encountered different types of data, we stipulated that they minimally design and conduct two interviews, consult a primary source (such as an online archive), and reference a secondary source (such as a course reading).

Students come into the classroom with their own expertise, learning goals, and knowledge of how they learn. Some of this may be couched in deficit narratives, like “I’m not a good writer.” We pushed students to interrogate why some ways of engaging were given more value than others, encouraging them to pursue research methods that aligned with their skills and goals. The completion of formative milestone assignments allowed students to receive feedback along the way, emphasizing not only the PRODUCTS of research but the PROCESS. Both in milestone assignments and Friday classes, students chose from a diverse menu of ways to make progress on their research. For example, in brainstorming activities, they could discuss topics out loud, create art, or draft a paper outline. As with the near-daily assignments, milestones and the final project were graded following the rubric in table 1, were due on flexible deadlines, and could be revised and resubmitted. “Revision” also included demonstrating mastery of the objective in subsequent work. Here, learning objectives allowed students to be sure that they were “hitting all the right points” to get the grade they wanted, while having the freedom to use their authentic voice.

As we had hoped, framing the assignment in this way resulted in a wide range of topics, and those topics reflected the diversity of experiences represented within the class. Further, projects leveraged skills that students both brought to and learned from the class. One student, whose family boasts multiple generations of special educators, researched how language around ability and accessibility has changed over time. Another student was inspired by their own family’s engagement with languages they have no ethnic or geographic ties to. They asked how perceptions of multilingualism, as a skill versus an impediment, relate to race and class privilege. Some students chose to focus on families other than their own; this was usually connected to personal relationships with their consultants and empathy for their experiences. One student interviewed a friend and his father about preserving ties to Armenian language and culture while living in the US. In the conclusion, they drew parallels between their research findings, examples from class, and observations of minoritized ethnicities and languages within their home country of China.

As a final example, one student’s project began with their own reflection on why their Japanese American family doesn’t speak Japanese. They combined original interviews with their mother and grandmother and primary sources from the Japanese American National Museum with their own reflections for a rich and deeply personal foundation to their project. Course readings on language loss and assimilation were integrated with additional sources, flavored by the student’s training in anthropology. This paper perfectly illustrates the spirit of the course in two ways. First, they chose a personally meaningful topic that benefits from their unique voice and sense of ownership. They extended the themes of the course to the lasting inter-generational effects of Japanese internment at concentration camps, an important topic that was not part of the course syllabus. Further, their assignment was an authentic product for a budding anthropologist. Second, the trajectory of their submission demonstrates the power of objectives-based grading as a force for equity. Due to circumstances beyond their control, this student was not able to finish writing the style of paper they originally planned. In lieu of giving an incomplete, we encouraged them to consider whether the work they had in fact already

done met the capstone's learning objectives. The student then submitted detailed notes and discussed their analysis with course staff, which made it clear that they had in fact achieved all of the objectives.

3. Results & feedback. Feedback from students, along with the quality of their work, point to the success of the course. Students felt positively about the classroom environment—a key factor in learner investment. Of 21 respondents to mid-semester feedback, all strongly agreed that they felt respected, and 90% agreed they felt included. Further, the flexible deadlines promoted learning even in difficult circumstances. One student wrote that “due to technological issues, pandemic-related mental health crises, taking care of younger siblings, etc [they] missed almost every deadline, but [were] still able to learn and get feedback on [their] work.”

And that feedback was engaged with enthusiastically: All 21 mid-semester respondents agreed that they felt comfortable incorporating feedback and resubmitting assignments. In final evaluations, one student described a “sense of care from this course staff” that “really encouraged [them] to finish the assignments and learn the material.”

These two components, inclusion and feedback, almost certainly contributed to the successful construction of authentic and independent experiences. Of 26 respondents to final course evaluations, 23 felt more prepared to take on research projects in the future and reported that they had practiced skills they can use in the future. Students felt more ownership over the project than what they had encountered in other classes. One student wrote: “Emily was very enthusiastic about our project ideas and the final project was open enough that we could do our own research on whatever we found interesting which made it much more independent than following a prompt.”

At the same time, feedback reveals that there is much room for improvement in normalizing the revise-and-resubmit process. Students were sometimes uneasy with the unfamiliar freedom to refine work they had already submitted. We wanted to give students the benefit of formative assessments, where the role of any assignment is not to stand alone but to inform the process of learning. In other courses, emphasis is often placed on individual work outputs, which are seen as finalized once submitted. Additionally, in teaching academic honesty, instructors may, appropriately, warn students of self-plagiarism. Perhaps informed by these experiences, some re-submissions reflected an unnecessary amount of “new work.” However, as academics, we already value incremental changes to work (as we can see from the process of “revise and resubmit” for academic publications). As instructors, we hope to more transparently parallel this process so that students will similarly come to value incremental progress, and not just the final product.

By focusing on incremental improvements, we create a more authentic learning experience, lower the stakes of individual assignments, and create space for making mistakes—a crucial part of the learning process. Furthermore, the supportive and empowering space instructors and students co-constructed fosters the freedom to creatively explore ideas and approaches, giving students ownership over their learning. While this felt especially crucial for a course dealing with social structures and oppression, the lessons apply to any classroom. Ultimately, by implementing objectives-based assessments and COVA-based independent research, learner investment was increased, resulting in greater learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

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