

**Analytic autoethnography:  
Centering students' linguistic and cultural experiences in assessment**

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**Abstract.** Autoethnography is often used as a field research method and by educators to foster intersectionality in, and critical reflection upon, their own pedagogy. However, autoethnography is not commonly used as an assessment tool. There appears to be no literature on its use in a linguistics course, and this paper aims to address that gap. Analytic autoethnography is a productive assessment method for a linguistics course. The goal of analytic autoethnography is to connect one's lived experience to theoretical concepts and research. I argue that using analytic autoethnography as an assessment method can help students critically reflect on their own lived linguistic and cultural experiences and to connect these to course content. Importantly, I argue that the assessment is more meaningful and more inclusive than standard exams. Additionally, analytic autoethnography is well suited to antiracist teaching as it requires students to examine the ways linguistic privilege and discrimination have affected their own lives and their communities of practice, thereby creating a linguistics classroom that is inclusive of all students' linguistic and cultural identities. As analytic autoethnography is written using the authors' native dialect(s) and language(s), it mitigates the privileging of Standard English in the classroom and puts into practice linguistic justice.

**Keywords.** assessment; linguistic anthropology; autoethnography; linguistic justice; inclusive pedagogy

**1. Introduction.** Assessment takes many forms, with summative exams being common. Yet, exams are often fraught when it comes to accommodating a diverse student population. They often privilege a specific type of learner and can discriminate against learners of color (see Stewart & Haynes (2016) on standardized testing bias, which can be extended to the typical in-class exam) and speakers of non-standard varieties (Johnson & VanBrackle 2012). To counter this, scholars have proposed various frameworks, such as Assessment for Inclusion (Nieminen 2022) and Differentiate Assessment (Noman & Kaur 2020), to foster inclusive and equitable pedagogy. In all classrooms, but especially in a linguistics classroom, assessment should support and reflect linguistic and cultural diversity. In this paper, I present an inclusive assessment method I designed and implemented in my linguistic anthropology course, language and culture. This course's summative assessment was originally three exams. In order to adapt the course for a new institution and better align with best pedagogical practices, I replaced the exams with an autoethnographic project designed to center students' linguistic and cultural experiences. Originally designated a self/autoethnography with analysis, I have modified it based on Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography. Below I detail its implementation in a midsized anthropology course at a small liberal arts college.

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## 2. Background

2.1. STUDENT BODY. Smith College is a teaching focused women's college with approximately 2,500 undergraduate students. While most students identify as women, there are students of all genders, and students from the surrounding four colleges take classes at Smith. The student body is predominantly white, with approximately one-third of students identifying as students of color.

2.2. COURSE OVERVIEW. The course is a second-year anthropology course with no prerequisites.<sup>1</sup> It counts towards several majors, including anthropology and education and child study. It also fulfills one of the Latin honor requirements.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it has a variety of majors and class years represented. The student demographics in the course vary somewhat from the college's student body. Per the course welcome survey, 42% of students identified as students of color, and 35% of the students identified as being multilingual, with languages including Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi, Yiddish, Bengali, and Sylheti.

The course is capped at 40 students. Class period is 75 minutes and meets twice a week for fifteen to sixteen weeks. The course is a combination of short, interactive lectures and in-class activities.

There are six primary learning outcomes for this class (see (1) below). The first three learning outcomes are assessed through weekly quizzes and a variety of in-class activities. The last three are assessed through fieldnotes and the final analytic autoethnography.

### (1) Learning Outcomes

- a. Demonstrate familiarity with the theory of linguistic relativity and be able to articulate the potential flaws & strengths of the theory
- b. Articulate how language endangerment and death and loss of culture are interrelated and give examples
- c. Provide examples from other cultures of how language and culture have affected one another
- d. Express which aspects of culture and language can affect each other and how
- e. Critically assess your own culture and language and point out examples where your culture and language affect one another
- f. Apply class concepts to your own language and culture and those of your communities of practice

The course is organized around 13 topics: linguistic relativity, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, dialects, bilingualism, creole languages, nations and nation building, time and space, onomastics, sign languages and Deaf culture, and endangered languages and revitalization.

The assessment structure of the course includes both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments occur in class, are graded based on completion, and count towards the participation grade. Summative assessments include weekly quizzes, fieldnotes, and the analytic autoethnography. The weekly quizzes are online and open-book and can be completed anytime

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<sup>1</sup> Smith College does not have a linguistics department/program and does not offer a linguistics major. Students can do a design-you-own minor in linguistics. The two currently offered linguistics courses are housed in Education and Child Studies and Anthropology.

<sup>2</sup> Smith College has an open curriculum, with the only requirement outside the major/minor being a writing course. However, to promote the liberal arts mission of the college, it has a Latin Honor that requires students to take one class in the seven major fields of knowledge, which are literature, arts, foreign language, historical studies, social science, natural science, and mathematics and analytic philosophy.

during the assigned week. The quizzes cover material from the previous week's module and if scores are low, that material is reviewed in class. Fieldnotes form the basis of the analytic autoethnography.

2.3. ANALYTIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY. Autoethnographies are common in anthropology, sociology, and fields such as teacher education. Researchers use autoethnography to reflect on their own learning and experiences. For example, Chew et al. (2015) use collaborative autoethnography to reflect on their graduate education as it relates to their own language reclamation. Teachers use it as a pedagogical tool to foster intersectionality in and critical reflection upon their own pedagogy (Frank & Uly 2004; Hernández & Munz 2021; Pennington 2007). As an assessment method, autoethnography is less common. Gannon (2018) and Pandey (2019) explore the role of autoethnography in the classroom, while Cook (2014) and Barr (2019) detail the use of autoethnography as an assessment method in a sociology course and an international relations course respectively.

Analytic autoethnography differs from evocative autoethnography (emotions-based, free-form narratives) as the goal is to connect one's lived experience to theoretical concepts (Anderson, 2006). First set out by Anderson (2006), it was originally meant for publication, which is not within the scope of a course assessment. For assessment purposes, I modified it so that students are applying course concepts to the broader sociolinguistic phenomena in their lives. Anderson (2006: 378) sets out five key features of analytic autoethnography: "complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis." All of these make it well-suited for a student-centered assessment in linguistics courses and for addressing the three learning outcomes noted above.

**3. Implementation.** The final project is scaffolded over the semester through 12 weekly fieldnotes, which are reflections on the weekly module topic. As not every student will have experience with every topic, students choose and write only seven fieldnotes. In addition to these, all students write an introductory fieldnote that provides the linguistic and cultural background necessary for reading the fieldnotes. Students then choose five of the seven fieldnotes to serve as the basis of their analytic autoethnography.

I have implemented the fieldnote assignment both with and without prompts. While prompts can be helpful in guiding students, they tend to restrict students and result in more homogenized fieldnotes across the class. Without prompts, some students struggle and require more guidance in the form of feedback, but it does promote greater heterogeneity. The fieldnotes are fairly short, with the required range being 250 to 500 words, though most students write more than that. All fieldnotes must include linguistic data. This can be a challenge for students, but one that students find rewarding according to course feedback.

In order to foster linguistic inclusivity and equity, students are encouraged to write in the English dialect they are most comfortable in. Code switching and meshing are encouraged and embraced in the course and its assessments. As the fieldnotes are all done digitally via Google docs, translating languages is easier as it has a built-in translation feature. Students mostly write in English, but there is considerable code switching into other languages.

At the beginning of the semester, I create a Google doc template that has general directions for completion on page one and each page after has a header with the topic and due date. I then create 40 copies and share one with each student. Access to the fieldnotes is restricted to the student and me. Feedback occurs in the form of comments on the document and focuses on appropriateness to the module topic, presence of relevant linguistic data, coherence of content,

and fit for the final analytic autoethnography. It is graded on a five-point scale, with opportunities to revise for full points.<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of the semester, students select and revise fieldnotes to turn into the analytic autoethnography. The first fieldnote becomes the introduction with relevant linguistic and cultural background information, their communities of practice, and the five topics covered. The fieldnotes provide autoethnographic information and students must revise them to include information from the class readings, lectures, and films (outside sources are optional). They must discuss the concepts and analyze examples from the fieldnotes to illustrate the concept. For example, if a student has a fieldnote on code switching, they will describe different types of code switches and triggers and give and discuss examples of their own code switches to illustrate the concepts. In this way, students leverage their own knowledge and are able to apply course concepts to their lives, which makes it more meaningful. The final analytic autoethnography is approximately 7-10 double-spaced pages and is submitted during finals week. Most students do very well, scoring a B or higher, and meet the learning outcomes.

**4. Diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion.** A benefit to this assessment is that it fosters an inclusive and equitable classroom. One way it is more inclusive and equitable is that it centers and values the students' lived linguistic and cultural experiences and places the student as the authority within the writing. In order to promote linguistic justice and work against linguistic discrimination (specifically the privileging of Standard Academic English (SAE)), students are encouraged to write in the English dialect they feel most comfortable in, which includes SAE for some students. In addition, grading focuses on content, not grammar. This benefits students from all linguistic backgrounds and, according to student course feedback, students who speak English as a second language find it freeing to not worry about grammar. One interesting benefit is that this genre levels the field with regard to previous experience. Students in general are unfamiliar with analytic autoethnography. Thus, they do not feel constrained by previous instruction and have a great deal of freedom in how they approach the work.

4.1. STUDENT FEEDBACK. An assessment is only inclusive if students feel included. To assess students' perceptions of assessment effectiveness and inclusion, I created two custom course feedback questions.<sup>4</sup> The two questions are "Did the final assessment (autoethnography) help you to apply class concepts to your own life, and if so, how?" and "Did the autoethnography & fieldnotes help foster inclusion of your linguistic and cultural identities in the course? Please elaborate." The course feedback rate was 52%.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty students responded to question one and all stated that the analytic autoethnography helped them apply course concepts to their own lives. All responses were positive and often noted that it helped them better understand themselves and the world around them. Many stated that this helped them think critically and apply concepts, with one noting, "Yes! Definitely was a good activity that helped me connect what we learned to my own language and culture, which I hadn't thought critically about very much."

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<sup>3</sup> 5 = excellent, 4 = good, 3 = satisfactory, 2 = poor, 1 = inadequate

<sup>4</sup> At Smith College, instructors can create two custom course feedback questions. The results of the course feedback are considered the property of the instructor and can be disseminated as all data has been anonymized and deidentified.

<sup>5</sup> The college response rate that semester was 46%. Completion of student course feedback is not incentivized nor required at Smith College, and this may be a reason behind low response rates.

To the second question, fourteen students responded, with each indicating yes, the analytic autoethnography helped foster inclusion of their linguistic and cultural identities. Several mentioned that it helped them articulate questions and ideas they had about their own identities. One student wrote “I was able to talk with my parents about their upbringing and how they see mine in terms of linguistic and cultural identities. Having prompts, like the topics we discussed in class, and going from there helped reassure some aspects of my identity that would have been shakier otherwise.”

One theme that emerged was that of validation. Students commented on how they felt validated by having a term for an experience or knowing that there were others who shared similar linguistic and cultural experiences. One commented that “I was able to reassess my previous understanding of myself and my beliefs [sic] from information that the readings and lectures provided... I now know of people that have experienced similar things and knowing that there are names for some experiences is validating.” These responses affirmed that this assessment method was more meaningful, inclusive, and responsive than a traditional exam.

**5. Conclusion.** Analytic autoethnography as an assessment method is inclusive and allows students to become agents in the creation of knowledge. With its scaffolded design, the grading load for the professor and work load for the student is not onerous. In addition, it is simple to implement. The linguistics classroom is naturally suited to analytic autoethnography. Students bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural experiences that connect to the core linguistic concepts of our field. While situated in a linguistic anthropology/ course, it can be implemented in a variety of linguistics courses, such as introductory phonology and syntax.

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