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Pre-service English Language Arts teachers' development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching

Amanda J. Godley^{a,*}, Jeffrey Reaser^{b,1}, Kaylan G. Moore^c

^a Department of Instruction and Learning, The University of Pittsburgh, 5105 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, 230 S. Bouquet St., Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA

^b North Carolina State University, Box 8105, Raleigh, NC 27695-8105, USA

^c Department of Instruction and Learning, 5300 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, 230 S. Bouquet St., Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined pre-service English teachers' (PSTs') development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching through an online course focused on language variation. All of the twenty-four PSTs in our study identified as white and speakers of Standardized English. We rated the quality of the PSTs' Critical Language Awareness for teaching through their contributions to weekly online discussions. We also qualitatively analyzed the PSTs' discussions for themes and tensions in their understanding of teaching Critical Language Awareness. We found that the PSTs' understanding and appreciation for dialect diversity and code-switching was strong, and most PSTs wanted to teach more critical aspects of language variation, such as how systems of privilege are reinforced through language ideologies. However, many PSTs avoided acknowledging their own white privilege and were less skilled and comfortable teaching about power structures than dialect diversity.

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Introduction

Literacy educators have long called for the inclusion of *Critical Language Awareness* (Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 1999) or *Critical Language Pedagogy* (Godley & Minnici, 2008) in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms (Alim, 2010; Delpit, 1988). Critical Language Awareness, drawing from Critical Discourse Analysis, posits that a critical examination of the power structures reflected and created through language is essential to all language and literacy education (Janks, 1999). Similarly, Critical Language Pedagogy is an instructional approach that guides students to critical examinations of the ideologies surrounding language and dialects, the power relations such ideologies uphold, and ways to change these ideologies (Godley & Minnici, 2008). Drawing from both scholarship on Critical Language Awareness and Critical Language Pedagogy, this article reports on a study of secondary ELA pre-service teachers' (PSTs') development of critical perspectives on dialect diversity and linguistic prejudice over the course of a four-week, online "mini-course" on language variation.

Educational research has demonstrated that content knowledge alone is not sufficient for preparing teachers to teach well; teachers must also develop *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK) – knowledge about how to explain, frame, assess, and develop the content knowledge for diverse groups of students (Ball & Bass, 2000; Shulman, 1986). For over forty years, literacy scholars and ELA organizations have called for English teachers to be equipped with PCK about language variation

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 412 527 8363.

E-mail addresses: agodley@pitt.edu (A.J. Godley), jreaser@ncsu.edu (J. Reaser), kmg20@pitt.edu (K.G. Moore).

¹ Tel.: +1 919 515 4176.

and language ideologies (CCCC/NCTE, 1974; Delpit, 1988; Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minicci, & Carpenter, 2006), but little research has examined the critical linguistic knowledge that is most useful to ELA teachers' instructional practices and how teachers develop it. Thus the specific goal of the mini-course was to increase PSTs' critical understanding of dialect diversity, language ideologies, and linguistic prejudices *for teaching*.

Our analysis of PSTs' development of critical perspectives on language for teaching focused on changes in the content and quality of PSTs' ideas about dialect diversity throughout the mini-course, the tensions and challenges we observed in PSTs' discussions, and the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of various design elements of the mini-course.

Throughout this article, we use the terms *dialect* and *language variety* interchangeably to refer to the patterns of language used by a group with a shared regional or social affiliation. As sociolinguists have documented, all languages include multiple varieties, all of which are valid and logical, possessing distinctive grammatical, phonological, lexical, and pragmatic patterns (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007). Acknowledging that there is no politically neutral or "perfect" term to refer to the language variety privileged in mainstream educational, professional, and civic institutions, we have chosen to use the term *Standardized English* rather than *Standard English* to refer to this variety because it emphasizes that the language variety that is most privileged in the U.S. is in a constant state of being "standardized" by being continually portrayed as the language variety that is most "correct" or "proper" (Charity-Hudley & Mallinson, 2010). Finally, we use the term *vernacular dialects* to refer to dialects other than Standardized English.

Pedagogical content knowledge

Our study draws from research in teacher development, which suggests that PSTs' development often requires changing core beliefs about and understandings of subject matter, students, and effective pedagogical routines (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Hammerness et al., 2005). Although shaping English teachers' knowledge and beliefs about language variation is essential to improving their instruction, such efforts must be coupled with learning sociolinguistic PCK (Ball & Bass, 2000; Godley et al., 2006; Shulman, 1986; Sweetland, 2006). Sociolinguistic PCK for ELA teachers includes (but is not limited to) accurately explaining features of dialects and grammatical patterns; evaluating students' language choices; developing students' competency in Standardized Written English; and teaching about systems of power and privilege (Haviland, 2008; McIntosh, 1988) that are maintained via language ideologies. We view the last dimension of sociolinguistic PCK to be most closely connected to Critical Language Awareness; however, as we demonstrate in this article, the other dimensions of sociolinguistic PCK form an essential foundation for teaching Critical Language Awareness.

Research on teachers' sociolinguistic content knowledge

A small but informative group of studies have pointed to the need to educate K-12 teachers about dialect diversity and linguistic prejudice. Both classroom-based studies (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007) and surveys of teachers (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Cross, DeVaney, & Jones, 2001) have demonstrated that many teachers erroneously believe that Standardized English is more grammatical than vernacular dialects and form negative opinions of students, particularly minority students, when they use vernacular dialects in school. Research also suggests that many teachers, including ELA teachers, lack basic sociolinguistic content knowledge (Smitherman & Villanueva, 2000). Especially in the content area of ELA, where language is the foundation of all the reading and writing skills taught, this lack of content knowledge often leads to harmful instructional practices and deficit views of students' literacy learning potential (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Fairbanks, 1998; Godley et al., 2007).

In order for teachers to effectively teach about dialect diversity and meet the learning needs of students whose home language practices differ from Standardized English, teachers need to possess basic sociolinguistic knowledge. Such knowledge includes the understanding that (a) the English language has various dialects that are equally valid and grammatical, (b) language varies in different contexts and communities in systematic ways, (c) language use reflects identity, and (d) language is often the basis for judgments about people (Adger et al., 2007). In one study, Fogel and Ehri (2006) found that teachers' attitudes toward a highly stigmatized dialect, African American English (AAE), improved modestly after receiving direct instruction in the grammatical patterns of the dialect and practicing using forms of the dialect in their own writing.

Furthermore, it is important for teachers to understand and challenge their own beliefs and prejudices about vernacular dialects (Godley et al., 2006; Sweetland, 2006). Because the vast majority of new teachers in the U.S. are white and were raised in homogenous, mostly suburban areas (Boser, 2014), most new teachers have had limited exposure to dialect diversity and vernacular dialects. At the same time that the teaching force is becoming increasingly white, female, and homogeneous, the percentage of students of color in U.S. public schools is increasing (Boser, 2014); as a result, teachers' and students' linguistic backgrounds and experiences likely differ more now than at any other point in U.S. history.

The dearth of existing research on in-service and PSTs' understanding of language variation speaks to the need for further examinations of the ways teachers learn sociolinguistic content knowledge and use it to inform their literacy instruction. Most existing studies have been limited to an examination of teachers' understanding of the validity and grammaticality of vernacular dialects, not teachers' development of *critical* perspectives on dialect diversity and linguistic discrimination, as Critical Language Awareness calls for (see Ball & Muhammad, 2003 for an exception). Our study contributes to this line of

research by examining how new teachers developed critical perspectives on dialect diversity and applied this knowledge to the teaching of ELA.

Critical Language Pedagogy and Critical Language Awareness

Learning sociolinguistic content knowledge about dialect equality and diversity is an important element of developing critical perspectives for language instruction, but it is not sufficient. Simply accepting or celebrating dialect diversity does not lead teachers or students to challenge existing structures of prejudice and privilege (Leets & Giles, 1993). As Alim (2010) pointed out, “By uncritically presenting language varieties as ‘equal’ but differing in levels of ‘appropriateness,’ language and dialect awareness programs run the risk of silently legitimizing ‘standard English,’ or what Fairclough (1992, p. 15) refers to as ‘dressing up inequality as diversity’” (p. 215).

Alternatively, as scholars of Critical Language Awareness and Critical Language Pedagogy have suggested (Alim, 2010; Chisholm & Godley, 2011; Clark, Fairclough, Ivanič, & Martin-Jones, 1991), to be truly critical, language pedagogy must teach students to question existing language ideologies and become aware of the ways in which language upholds systems of privilege and discrimination. Critical approaches to language instruction must also include praxis, or conscious action on the part of students to change the world around them, making it a less oppressive place (Chisholm & Godley, 2011; Clark & Ivanič, 1997). This vision of Critical Language Awareness and Critical Language Pedagogy aligns with the goals of multicultural and social justice education, which are to not only value diversity but also to encourage critical analyses of systems of power such as racism and to create a more equitable and just society (Banks, 1993; Gorski, 2006).

Links between language ideologies, racism and white privilege

Traditionally, social scientists have distinguished between race and ethnicity based on the first being genetically determined and the later associated with social or identity acts. However, such a distinction is cleaner in theory than in practice (Zelinsky, 2001). Many sociologists have even “argued vigorously for discontinuing the use of the term ‘race’” (Bobo, 2001, p. 267). While acknowledging that definitions and theories of race are often imprecise and problematic, we follow a group of sociologists who maintain such distinctions are crucial since “The concepts of race and ethnicity are social realities because they are deeply rooted in the consciousness of individuals and groups, and because they are firmly fixed in our society’s institutional life” (Smelser, Wilson, & Mitchell, 2001, p. 9).

In order to develop the Critical Language Awareness for teaching and PCK we call for in this article, PSTs and those who teach them must develop an understanding of racism and other systems of power and privilege that undergird many social institutions and that often operate unconsciously through what has been called “the white racial frame” (Feagin, 2013, p. 3; Leonardo & Grubb, 2013). Because most new teachers identify as white, one pervasive and often unacknowledged kind of power and privilege that must be included in the development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching is white privilege (Kendall, 2013; Leonardo, 2009; Liggett, 2014; McIntosh, 1988) or what is sometimes referred to as “epistemological racism” (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Exploring issues of white privilege is essential “to prepare students for citizenship in a deliberative democracy, [and] to develop their capacity to understand different perspectives” (Liggett, 2014, p. 2).

Much current research on race, ethnicity, and poverty in education has rejected the prevalent view of earlier research that characterized poor and non-white students as “deficient” in comparison to their more affluent and white peers (Lee, 2006; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). However, when issues of language are concerned, deficit arguments about poor and non-white students often reappear (see Hart & Risley, 1995 for an example). Widespread assumptions about the nature of language, or language ideologies, perpetuate the myth that Standardized English is better and more grammatical than the language varieties spoken by many black and Latino students (Godley et al., 2007) and thus perpetuate a deficit view of many students. To overcome this deficit thinking and develop anti-racist Critical Language Awareness for teaching, teachers must understand and acknowledge whiteness and Standardized English as non-neutral and to teach that ideologies surrounding Standardized English – historically the dialect spoken by affluent white people – work to reinforce existing structures of power that privilege middle and upper-class whites (Feagin, 2013; Leonardo & Grubb, 2013).

A number of educational scholars have examined the ways in which white teachers deny or ignore institutional racism and the white privilege that they hold (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Flynn, Lensmire, & Lewis, 2009; Haviland, 2008). We use the term “white talk” to describe the discourse strategies white students often use to evade discussions of white privilege as it relates to language (Haviland). Characteristics of white talk described by Bonilla-Silva and Forman included “color-blind racism” in which whites use descriptions of culture or non-specific language as a proxy for talking about race (p. 3) and phrases such as “I am not a racist but...” as a shield for following racist comments (see also van Dijk, 1984). Haviland’s study of “White educational discourse” (p. 41) found white students avoided acknowledging white privilege through avoiding race-related terminology, engaging in safe self-critique, asserting ignorance or uncertainty, letting other white students off the hook, citing authority, silence and changing the topic. Strategies for perpetuating white privilege include affirming sameness, joking, agreeing and supporting, praising and student caring, socializing and sharing personal information, and focusing on barriers to multicultural education. In our study, we noticed patterns of white talk when the PSTs avoided or denied their own white privilege as white speakers of Standardized English and when they questioned or avoided the teaching of white privilege as part of Critical Language Pedagogy. Because of the silent and invisible role white talk plays in creating academic disparities and upholding white privilege (linguistic and otherwise), it is critical that

new teachers learn strategies for recognizing and overcoming white talk in their classrooms when talking about linguistic diversity.

Material and methods

Context of study

The language variation mini-course was implemented during the second semester of a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) post-baccalaureate teacher education program in secondary English Language Arts at an urban, Midwestern university in the United States. Twenty-four secondary English PSTs participated in our study. The PSTs were all white and included 16 women, and 8 men, most of whom had grown up in suburban communities. The demographics of our participants were similar to the gender, race, and geographic background of the majority of the current teaching force in the U.S. (Boser, 2014). As a prerequisite to the program, all the PSTs had taken a course in sociolinguistics, sociocultural theories of literacy, the history of the English language, or English grammar. Approximately half of the PSTs were concurrently student teaching in urban schools in which a majority of students were black and low-income and half in suburban schools in which most students were white and middle class.

With permission from the instructors, the PSTs completed an online mini-course over the first four weeks of the second semester of their teacher education program as part of their advanced methods course. The mini-course we created included four modules and was completed in addition to required course readings and activities related to the teaching of ELA. Each module contained specific learning goals that connected to Common Core State Standards for ELA (see Appendix A for an outline of the curriculum). The modules drew from previous scholarship on teaching about language variation (Reaser & Adger, 2007) and were designed to introduce PSTs to the ways adults and adolescents use language across different communities and engage PSTs in discussions about how they would respond to and teach about language variation, language ideologies, and linguistic discrimination in their secondary ELA classrooms. Each module began with a realistic teaching scenario connected to language variation. After reading the scenario, the PSTs were required to read/view online (mostly Internet-based, open-access) print texts, audio-recordings, and videos to help them develop sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK. The PSTs then discussed the print, audio and video texts online through discussion wikis, making at least four required comments per week on either two or three topics. Each wiki comment was expected to be at least a paragraph and to directly respond to a classmate's previous comment. Students reported spending, on average, 3.5 h per week completing the module readings and activities (14 h for the entire course).

Data sources

Data sources included online wiki discussions and questionnaires given to the students before and after the mini-course. The PSTs engaged in eleven online wiki discussions about specific aspects of dialect diversity and language ideologies (see Appendix A for the discussion topics). The wikis culminated in 376 posts over the course of the four modules. Most of the PSTs' discussion board posts were substantial, averaging 254 words per post and resulting in a large dataset of approximately 95,000 words.

The PSTs also completed pre- and post-questionnaires that asked them to identify aspects of their linguistic, racial, and cultural backgrounds; to respond to hypothetical teaching scenarios; and to assess various aspects of the mini-course including feedback on what they learned and the application of the mini-course for their own teaching practice.

Data analysis

We first coded the PSTs' online discussions using turns-at-talk as units of analysis, coding twelve dimensions of teachers' sociolinguistic content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. We drew from existing scholarship in sociolinguistics and Critical Language Awareness to pinpoint six essential dimensions of sociolinguistic content knowledge teachers would need to teach about language variation critically (Adger et al., 2007; Chisholm & Godley, 2011; Clark et al., 1991). See Table 1 for a list of the categories. Each turn at talk was rated for each dimension of sociolinguistic content knowledge, using the following scale: 4 = very accurate; 3 = accurate/specific; 2 = general/implied; 1 = inaccurate; and "NA" = not applicable.

Table 1
Sociolinguistic content knowledge coding categories.

Dimension of content knowledge
Dialects are patterned and grammatical
Dialects are valid (e.g., have historical rationales, are worth sustaining, have expressive value)
Language varies by contexts (geography, history, purpose)
Language varies by social/racial community (race, SES, etc.)
Language use and identity are strongly related
Language is often the basis for judgment/prejudices about other things (education, politeness, intelligence, etc.)

Table 2
Pedagogical content knowledge coding categories.

Dimensions of PCK
Accurate explanations about language
Assessing students' language choices
Developing students' use of SWE
Considering learning needs and linguistic/regional/SES/racial background of students
Discussing language variation with students
Teaching about White Privilege and systems of power

We used the same research base to identify six dimensions of PCK that represented productive and critical teaching about language variation, language ideologies, and systems of privilege and power. See Table 2 for a list of those codes. Each turn at talk was rated for each dimension of PCK, using the following scale: 4 = very positive/specific; 3 = positive/general; 2 = somewhat negative; 1 = very negative; "NA" = not applicable.

Inter-rater reliability was determined using Cohen's Kappas for various coders (see Cohen, 1968). Four coders coded over 5% of the corpus, and pairwise Kappas were computed for each set of two coders, resulting in forty-two comparisons with kappa results ranging from .55 to .80 for the sociolinguistic content knowledge and .35 to .82 for PCK. This analysis required that the coding system be tweaked slightly and training was conducted in accurately coding for a few coding categories for which a good deal of variation existed among coders. Following the training, the student coders independently coded approximately half the data set and inter-rater reliability calculations were run again to ensure consistency. This analysis found that inter-rater reliability among the students improved substantially, and one student then coded the remaining data set, checking periodically with the PIs to ensure further consistency.

We conducted a second round of open coding on the wiki discussion dataset using focused and patterned coding techniques (Saldana, 2009). These methods allowed us to identify major themes in the PSTs' responses, relationships between themes, and students' interactions with each other. We coded the dataset line by line to identify examples to be classified under the respective thematic categories. Finally, we coded for instances of discourse strategies associated with white talk and instances where students acknowledged their own white privilege or argued for teaching about white privilege (Haviland, 2008) (Table 3).

Results and discussion

PSTs' development of critical language awareness for teaching: quantitative and qualitative patterns

As noted in the "Data analysis" section, each PST turn-at-talk in the wiki discussions was rated on a four-point scale (along with a "not applicable" category) to rate the presence and quality of six dimensions of sociolinguistic content knowledge and six dimensions of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Overall, the quality of PSTs' sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK at the beginning of the course was strong, with scores for every dimension of content knowledge averaging between 2 and 3 (between "general/implied" and "accurate/specific") and scores for PCK averaging in the low 3s (with a score of 3 indicating a positive but general teaching strategy).

Another significant and related finding in our quantitative data was the lack of incorrect sociolinguistic content knowledge in the PSTs' responses, which runs contrary to earlier studies of teachers (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Cross et al., 2001). Though most of the PSTs had previously taken a course that taught sociolinguistic-based information, it is still striking that only seventeen of the 373 comments – less than 5% – were coded as containing incorrect sociolinguistic knowledge. Of those, more than half of the incorrect scores (9) were misconceptions about the idea that "language is the basis for judgment." The majority of these comments argued that all dialects are equally discriminated against. As we will discuss later, we interpret this finding as evidence of some students' avoidance of acknowledging white privilege through overgeneralization and "color blind" claims of discrimination (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Flynn et al., 2009).

Overall, however, we did not see a steady increase in the quality of PSTs' content knowledge and PCK in their discussion comments as the course progressed. In fact, for the twelve dimensions of sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK coded for here, not a single knowledge followed a clear trajectory of growth. We suggest a few possible explanations, in addition to PSTs' relatively high initial scores, for this finding.

Table 3
Open coding themes.

Dimensions of PCK
Purpose of teaching about dialects
Future goals of students
Overgeneralization of dialect prejudices
Mismatch between CK and PCK
Acknowledgment/denial of White Privilege and systems of power

First, the PSTs completed readings and viewings related to Critical Language Pedagogy before their discussions, so each discussion was informed by recent exposure to sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK. Second, our broad rating categories might have missed the concretizing of sociolinguistic knowledge in more subtle ways, especially since it conflated accuracy and specificity. Third, not all of the prompts encouraged PSTs to discuss all dimensions of content knowledge and PCK equally; in fact, when a dimension of content knowledge or PCK was specifically targeted in the discussion prompt, the accuracy/specificity scores for that knowledge increased, but when a dimension was not targeted, PSTs tended to talk about it in vaguer terms, and the score decreased. This suggests that separating out “accuracy” from “specificity” of each comment might allow us to tease out these nuances more.

The frequency and quality of teachers' sociolinguistic content knowledge

In addition to overall quality and growth in PSTs' sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK, we analyzed which dimensions of content knowledge and PCK the PSTs were most knowledgeable about and confident discussing by comparing the number of times PSTs mentioned specific dimensions of content knowledge and PCK and by comparing the quality of their understanding of those dimensions. Overall, the PSTs mentioned dimensions of content knowledge more than PCK, or knowledge for teaching, suggesting that the teachers felt more confident in their understanding of sociolinguistic principles than their knowledge of how to apply them to literacy instruction. Of the 373 PST comments, on average 183 comments were coded for each of the six sociolinguistic content knowledge dimensions (range of 42–307), compared to only 132 comments coded for PCKs (range of 65–237). On the other hand, this finding might be explained by the fact that it is difficult to talk about PCK without mentioning content knowledge. For example, the content knowledge category that was most commonly expressed was “all dialects are valid.” If one is talking about teaching about dialects, it's difficult to not mention this foundational concept in sociolinguistics, and indeed, 307 of the 373 student comments did so. An example of this is Parker's comment in the first wiki discussion about dialect myths, in which he wrote:

The linguistic differences that exist between groups should not be a source of concern, for no dialect is ‘better’ or ‘more correct’ than another. They are simply different. From a teaching perspective, educators should never approach their students with intent to erase their individualized dialects in favor of ‘Standard American English,’ but should instead seek to expand the students' registers of linguistic knowledge as a whole.

In his comment, Parker's description of effective teaching rests on his assertion of the foundational sociolinguistic principle that all dialects are equally valid and beneficial. Like Parker, most of the PSTs seemed to easily grasp this principle and referred to it often. However, the PSTs applied this principle to teaching in various ways. Some PSTs, such as Titus, believed that understanding dialect equality was important for building productive relationships with students: “A teacher who passes judgment on a student's dialect and language use may have a difficult time connecting with that student.” Similarly, other PSTs discussed the importance of teachers not judging students' academic abilities based on their vernacular language use. We also witnessed a change in PSTs' stance toward dialect equality from the beginning to the end of the course. At the beginning of the course, PSTs often wrote about developing teachers' and students' “empathy” for vernacular dialects. Drawing from research on multicultural development (Banks, 1993) we viewed the term “empathy” as similar to “tolerance,” a very naïve stage of multicultural and critical thinking. However, as the course progressed, more PSTs wrote about teaching dialect equality as a way to combat discrimination. For example, in the last discussion, Hailey wrote, “It's important that students from any background become aware that there is not one correct dialect or way of speaking. I think that the more people who are educated to understand that dialects are all legitimate varieties of a language, the fewer instances of discrimination based on dialect will occur.”

The next most commonly expressed sociolinguistic content knowledge dimensions were “language varies by contexts” and “language is used as a basis for judgment/prejudices about other things (education, politeness, intelligence, etc.).” PSTs drew upon the principle that “language varies by context” most often during discussions of how to respond to students who used features of vernacular dialects in their academic writing or how to value code-switching and code-meshing. Nina, for instance, wrote:

Of the two placements I have worked in, both in an urban setting, I have seen one set of staff members treat dialect in the sense of this myth [that the dialect is inferior] while the school personnel in the other placement have embraced the skill of code switching and encourage their students to strengthen both their academic language and cultural language. The reality is that, instead of failing to speak the standard language features, dialect speakers adopt the speech features of those around them. This reality infers that dialect speakers are resourceful speakers who operate as chameleons in their environment.

Many PSTs, like Nina, recognized that it was valuable to use different language varieties depending on the context and audience and that teachers' negative reactions to vernacular dialects were based on erroneous judgments. Comments like Nina's connected to the other commonly mentioned sociolinguistic principle, “language is used as a basis for judgment/prejudices about other things (education, politeness, intelligence, etc.).” Many PSTs noted that they would not judge their students on their language use and they would want to teach their students not to judge others. For example, Camilla wrote, “I want my students to understand that people should not be judged based on the way they speak, because the way that one speaks is largely determined simply by the area that individual grows up in, rather than due to factors such as intelligence or

Table 4
Summary of PSTs' sociolinguistic content knowledge.

Content knowledge	Total comments	Rank by number of comments	Rank of accuracy/specificity	Average comment rating
Dialects are valid	307	1	3	2.35
Language varies by context	278	2	1	2.58
Language as basis for judgment	217	3	2	2.48
Dialects are patterned	165	4	5	2.15
Language varies by social category	88	5	4	2.15
Language use and identity are connected	43	6	6	2.14

character." This finding suggests that the PSTs were overall comfortable discussing how assumptions about language are tied to prejudices, an important concept for the development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching. However, as we discuss below, PSTs' views on judgments about language use rarely tied these judgments to systems of privilege and power in our society and more often framed them as prejudices held by individuals, much as racism is often portrayed as a individual prejudice rather than an institutionalized system of discrimination (Gorski, 2006).

Other aspects of sociolinguistic content knowledge were rarely mentioned. "Language use and identity are strongly related" was only found in 43 of the 373 comments and primarily in the module and related wiki discussions related to language and identity. Surprisingly few comments – only 88 – contained discussions that "language varies by social/racial communities" even though many discussion prompts asked students to consider such social categories such as race as well as regional dialects. This suggests that PSTs are readily able to talk about regional dialects but less comfortable talking about social dialects tied to race and ethnicity. Discussing and developing critical stances toward such social dialects is a critical aspect of developing Critical Language Awareness for teaching since such dialects have a strong connection to systems of power (such as race and class) in U.S. society (Godley et al., 2006).

In terms of the quality of the PSTs' comments on the sociolinguistic content knowledge dimensions, PSTs scored the highest (meaning their comments contained the most highly specific and accurate information) on the "language varies by context" dimensions. Thus, in addition to being comfortable with discussing that content knowledge, PSTs were also generally specific and accurate in their understanding. Their understandings of the sociolinguistic content knowledge dimension "language as the basis for judgment" was the second highest content knowledge dimension in terms of quality. This finding suggests that PSTs were able to accurately explain, using specific examples, how speakers of vernacular dialects were unjustly stereotyped and discriminated against because of the language variety they used – an important aspect of Critical Language Awareness (Alim, 2010) – though, as mentioned above, these comments rarely extended to institutionalized racism and white privilege. The most commonly expressed knowledge, that "all dialects are valid" scored third overall in terms of quality.

This tight correlation between the most commonly raised aspects of sociolinguistic content knowledge and the quality of students' knowledge suggests that in these discussions, students, unsurprisingly, focused their comments on what they knew and seemed not to push themselves or each other to discuss less familiar/comfortable topics without specific prompting. Similarly, the less commonly expressed aspects of sociolinguistic content knowledge were those that were rated lower quality in their specificity and accuracy. This correlation can be seen in Table 4.

The frequency and quality of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge

Our findings for the PSTs' PCK follow similar patterns to those for sociolinguistic content knowledge. As mentioned above, overall there were fewer comments that included PCK than sociolinguistic content knowledge, but similar patterns emerged. The aspects of PCK that were commonly included in PSTs' responses were also those that rated highly for accuracy/specificity, though the pattern was not as clear-cut as for sociolinguistic content knowledge (see Table 5).

The aspects of sociolinguistic PCK that the PSTs most often raised were the ways they would consider the learning needs of students from diverse linguistic/regional/SES/racial backgrounds and the ways they would discuss language variation with their students. In terms of quality, PSTs comments about learning needs ranked fourth and comments about discussing language variation ranked second. One example of a discussion of considering the learning needs of students occurred when

Table 5
Summary of PSTs' pedagogical content knowledge.

Content knowledge	Total comments	Rank by number of comments	Rank of accuracy/specificity	Average comment rating
Considering the learning needs of diverse students	237	1	Tied-4	3.06
Discussing language variation with students	222	2	2	3.19
Developing students' use of academic English	106	3	Tied-4	3.06
Accurate information/terminology	94	4	1	3.20
Addressing students' language choices	66	5	3	3.11
Teaching about White Privilege and systems of power	65	6	6	2.97

Jessica described a negative response to African American English at her high school, “I went to a reasonably diverse high school and African American Vernacular was not held in high esteem by the teachers, something that they made clear when it came to speaking and writing in the classroom.” Camilla responded, “I wonder how the education of those within your high school would have differed had AAE been viewed in a more positive light by the teaching staff? It reminds me of the slam poets we read about during the fall semester, who often felt as though their work was sub-par or wouldn’t be viewed favorably by teachers because they were not writing in ‘standard’ or ‘academic’ English.” In the exchange between Jessica and Camilla, the PSTs considered how negative responses to black students’ use of AAE might harm the students’ academic self-images and writing development. PSTs’ descriptions of how they would explain various concepts in sociolinguistics to their students were also highly rated, though not as common.

The pedagogical strategy of “teaching about white privilege and systems of power” was the least commonly expressed PCK and scored the lowest overall in terms of quality. As above, it seems that we see quite clearly a few topics that the PSTs were and were not comfortable talking about. They were comfortable talking about regional variation but less so about social variation; they were eager to celebrate language diversity, but less comfortable thinking critically about why some dialects are more stigmatized than others. In the next section, we analyze how students avoided and initiated discussions about white privilege and other systems of power.

White privilege and white talk

In this section, we analyze the PSTs’ acknowledgment, avoidance, or denial of white privilege through the discursive features of white talk described by [Bonilla-Silva and Forman \(2000\)](#), [Haviland \(2008\)](#) and others. Because all of the PSTs in our study, and over 80% of K-12 teachers in the U.S., identify as white, understanding how teachers acknowledge or deny this system of privilege and its maintenance through language is crucial to designing effective Critical Language Awareness programs for teachers. Many of the limitations we noticed in PSTs’ development of Critical Language Awareness for Teaching were caused by an avoidance of discussing systems of discrimination and privilege, especially white privilege.

As discussed in the “PSTs’ development of critical language awareness for teaching: quantitative and qualitative patterns” section, the PSTs were more likely to argue that they would celebrate dialect diversity in their classrooms than to discuss systems of power and privilege maintained through language. Although some PSTs overtly denied that white privilege existed, others evaded discussions of white privilege and other privileges through using vague, non-specific language to refer to groups of people; expressing fear of students’ emotional responses to discussions about language; over-identifying with the experiences of speakers of vernacular dialects; and expressing constant agreement with each other’s perspectives.

Often in the discussions, vague, non-specific language was used to refer to language varieties and groups of people that made discussions of linguistic discrimination “color blind” ([Flynn et al., 2009](#); [Haviland, 2008](#)). For instance, Austin argued that, “As teachers, it’s extremely important to reserve judgment of our students’ speech.” In reality, it is most often white teachers who negatively judge black and Latino students’ speech ([Alim, 2010](#); [Godley et al., 2006](#); [Heath, 1983](#)), but the wording of Austin’s comment implies that all teachers tend to negatively judge all students’ speech, avoiding the institutionalized patterns of racism and discrimination inherent in white teachers’ attitudes toward minority students’ ways of using language. Similarly, Parker avoided specifying the types of students who are most likely to be singled out when he commented that “Students tend to look down on those who do not speak the same dialect as the majority of the school’s population, rather than simply accepting the fact that there are a number of dialects that exist within any community.” And Nina, in commenting on how she would teach about vernacular dialects through *To Kill A Mockingbird* ([Lee, 1960](#)) noted, “The end result should be to give students the perspective that dialect is a two-way street and perhaps the characters would have thought the students in this class speak differently as well, but neither of the language variations are stupid or wrong.” In these and other comments, students’ stated beliefs about the equality of all dialects obscured the fact that not all dialects or students are discriminated against equally.

The PSTs also repeatedly expressed concern and fear of teaching about topics that would lead to tension or strong emotions on the part of students ([Flynn et al., 2009](#); [Haviland, 2008](#)). They used terms like *difficult*, *delicate*, *complicated*, *touchy*, *taken personally*, and *complex* to characterize critical discussions about language. PSTs were also afraid of offending their students during conversations about vernacular dialects and language and power, particularly if their students were black. For instance, Nina wrote the following about teaching about linguistic profiling, “It is important to be sensitive and make sure that you are not attacking your students no matter your students’ race.” Kelly responded by saying, “I agree with what everyone has been saying about just treading the activity carefully and just making sure that you are reading your students in order for students to get the most out of the activity without feeling isolated.” In response to Nina and Kelly’s comments, we wonder, what students would likely feel “attacked” and “isolated” by learning about linguistic profiling? Most likely, students who are privileged and realize that they would be more likely to engage in linguistic profiling than be victims of such discrimination. Many PSTs like Nina and Kelly seemed to use language about being sensitive to students to avoid teaching about racism and white privilege.

Some PSTs avoided discussing white privilege by over-generalizing the experiences of minorities who speak vernacular dialects, making claims such as “we all code switch” and “we’re all discriminated against because of our language.” Jamila,

for instance, wrote, “I would want to teach students that discrimination and profiling happens to all people, no matter their race.” In a response to teaching code-switching in ELA classes, Titus noted:

I would have to disagree with Dr. James Sledd. I don't believe that this type of approach [teaching code-switching] promotes 'formal initiation into the linguistic prejudices of the white middle class.' We all code-switch in our everyday lives, whether it is conscious or not. I was able to make it through my undergrad program by doing just that. The way that I speak and write to my friends differs from my “academic language” used in school settings. I do not think that this is initiating students into the language of white people. I am not suggesting that we discredit or try to remove other language varieties in order to promote SWE as the universal language.

In his response, Titus uses two strategies of white talk: overgeneralizing the experiences of racial minorities (“we all code-switch”) and positioning himself as a non-racist white person (“I am not suggesting that we discredit or try to remove other language varieties”) (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Haviland, 2008).

In retrospect, one of our wiki discussion prompts seemed to encourage the PSTs to over-identify with racial minorities and others likely to face linguistic discrimination. The prompt read, “Describe a time when you were in a situation where you spoke markedly differently from others OR the way you spoke brought unwanted attention to you. How did it affect your conversation and connection to others? How did it make you feel?” Although our hope was that the prompt would raise the PSTs’ awareness of the emotional and relational effects of linguistic stereotypes, most students responded to the prompt with descriptions of times they felt slightly embarrassed or uncomfortable. A handful of PSTs, however, noted that they rarely faced negative judgment due to their language use because they were privileged. Monica, for instance, noted, “I cannot recall a time when I've been asked to change or alter the way I spoke. Certainly, though, I'm speaking from the perspective of white privilege. My home language is extremely close to Standardized, Northern English. I have never felt chastised, victimized or unintelligent because of my language. This is a privilege that goes often unrecognized by individuals. This is a prejudice that I have not undergone, but am certainly aware of its effect on my students.”

The last discourse strategy that many PSTs used to avoid discussing white privilege was constant agreement and ratification of each other's views (Haviland, 2008). Many wiki posts began with the phrase, “I agree with...” and PSTs only challenged each other's ideas a handful of times. Additionally, PSTs often repeated each other's vocabulary, such as their recurrent use of the term “empathy” to describe the appropriate response to vernacular dialects in Module 1.

Some PSTs, however, seemed to develop their understanding of white privilege in response to the materials and discussions in the course. The discussion about the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) public service announcement on linguistic profiling seemed to be a pivotal discussion for many PSTs. Many PSTs noted that the prevalence of linguistic discrimination became “real” for them after learning about the frequency of linguistic profiling in current U.S. society. In response to this topic, Austin wrote, “I think there's a lot we take for granted as native speakers of the language of power, and it's extremely important—especially as teachers—to keep in mind that many people do not have it so easy.” Nile, who at the beginning of the course argued for the superiority of Standardized English and had the lowest quality sociolinguistic content knowledge and PCK in the class, wrote in a final post:

Throughout the first three modules, we were encouraged to think about times when we felt uncomfortable or “other” because of our language. While I was able to recall a few incidents where I felt this way, none of them were particularly jarring, and none of them really had an impact on anything major in my life. . . I feel that the most important components of a lesson on linguistic diversity (especially if you are teaching a group of students who aren't the targets of racial or linguistic prejudice themselves) would be these specific examples of what prejudice looks like in the real world. It's easy to tell a group of people that something is wrong, and that the something wrong is “out there” and affecting the lives of millions and millions of people, but, without specific examples, it doesn't seem real. There's the passive kind of prejudice that gets people hating one another quietly, but that passive prejudice doesn't stay passive—sooner or later it always turns active, and it's the active prejudice that does the damage that you can touch and see and measure. Nowadays, at least in the United States, it's not acceptable to gratify your hate with a noose or a whip, but you can gratify it with a telephone [through linguistic profiling], and it's still just as poisonous. . . If you allow students to see prejudice actively, I think that they'll be far more aware of what they can do to stop it, or at least take steps to blunt its edge.

In this contribution to discussion, we view Nile as making important strides in his development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching. In the first paragraph, Nile seems to be acknowledging his privilege, noting that he sees important differences between how he has been judged by his speech on occasion and how linguistic profiling against vernacular dialect speakers, particularly racial minorities, results in serious material and emotional consequences. Nile also emphasized the importance of educating his mostly white students about current linguistic and racial discrimination. For the first time, Nile's goals for teaching about language were critical and focused on combatting prejudice. Finally, Nile made a distinction between “active” and “passive” racism. We interpret his term “active” to mean obvious and “passive” to refer to less blatant forms of discrimination such as micro-aggressions and institutionalized racism. Although Nile still seemed to be developing his Critical Language Awareness for teaching and the vocabulary to talk about privilege, learning about widespread current linguistic discrimination and its effect on people's lives seemed to prompt him

Table 6
 PSTs ratings of the course.

Element of the course	Average rating
Teaching scenarios (written)	2.83
Teaching scenarios (video/blogs)	3.26
Readings about language and language variation	3.43
Videos about language and language variation	3.52
Individual activities	2.96
Wiki discussions	2.73

Table 7
 Most important ideas learned from mini-course.

Important idea	Number of student responses
Raise students' awareness of language discrimination, stereotypes, and systems of privilege	9
Teach about the quality and validity of all dialect	8
Acknowledge that language varieties are closely tied to students' identities	8
Help students change language discrimination and systems of privilege	7
Teach students to value and celebrate dialect diversity	7
Teach students about code-switching or how to code-switch	7
Give students access to "codes of power"	6
Know myself and unconscious prejudices and privileges	5

to reconsider his instructional goals for teaching about language and about prejudice more generally. For Nile and other PSTs, the discussion of linguistic discrimination also highlighted a pedagogical tension between teaching social justice through literature or through current events. Many students felt, like Nile, that it was too easy for students to dismiss the reality and pervasiveness of linguistic prejudice and white privilege when it was discussed through literature, particularly fiction.

Although a handful of PSTs explicitly acknowledged their white privilege from the beginning of the course, a number of other PSTs – like Nile and Austin – began talking about white privilege for the first time. On the other hand, two PSTs focused their course reflection on how important it was to learn that language discrimination “goes beyond race.”

Evaluation of the curriculum

In our post-questionnaire, we asked PSTs to rate various design elements of the course from 1 (not useful) to 4 (very useful) (see Table 6). Every element of the course was rated highly, with most design elements of the curriculum averaging scores over 3 on a 4 point scale. In their open-ended comments, PSTs also noted that they appreciated the variety of materials (text, audio, and video) that the curriculum provided. Additionally, we asked PSTs to rate each wiki discussion for both the amount they learned from it and how important it was for their teaching. Again, all but one wiki (an activity that asked PSTs to consider their own use of slang and text language) earned average scores of over 3 on a 4 point scale for both amount learned and importance for teaching. Interestingly, the discussions in Module 4 focused on linguistic discrimination and power earned the highest average scores. PSTs found the video texts to be the most useful, a finding that aligns with earlier research on teaching about language variation (Reaser, 2010).

In the PSTs' open-ended comments about the course, many mentioned the activities and materials surrounding the fourth module, such as “Listen Mr Oxford Don,” and the HUD Public Service Announcement, as most valuable to their teaching. This suggests that the PSTs value teaching about language, power, and discrimination with their students. However, the PSTs also mentioned that the less critical “myths and realities” discussion in Module 1 was important as an introduction to discussing language variation more critically.

Twenty-three PSTs participated in the final discussion board, which asked, “What 2–3 major ideas are you taking away from these modules for your own teaching? Students' responses were varied (see Table 7). The most frequent ideas mentioned were balanced between less critical aspects of sociolinguistic content and PCK (teaching about the value of all dialects, acknowledging the link between language and identity, and celebrating dialect diversity) and important topics in Critical Language Awareness (raising students' awareness of language discrimination and privilege and helping students change systems of discrimination and privilege).

Conclusions

Generally, the PSTs in our study seemed to develop productive Critical Language Awareness for teaching ELA. They seemed to accept without resistance that language ideologies and linguistic prejudices existed and upheld social inequalities, particularly those based in racism. In light of other recent research demonstrating white students' resistance to acknowledging

racism in current society (Flynn et al., 2009; Haviland, 2008), we were encouraged by this finding. Students' acceptance that linguistic discrimination continued to exist in the U.S. may have been influenced by the course in sociolinguistics, sociocultural studies of literacy, or the history/grammar of the English language that was a required prerequisite for the teacher education program. However, this finding suggests that new teachers may have a different, more informed outlook on dialect diversity and linguistic discrimination than teachers who participated in earlier studies of language attitudes (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Bowie & Bond, 1994; Cross et al., 2001). In fact, a number of PSTs described how their mentor teachers responded to vernacular dialects in uninformed and negative ways, noting that they wanted to teach about dialect diversity differently.

PSTs were quick to advocate for the value of all dialects and literacy instruction that "honored" and celebrated" the vernacular dialects used by students and found in literature. Their belief in the value of all dialects often had a kind of "color-blind" view of dialect diversity that did not acknowledge power structures, their place in it, or the varying degrees of code-switching required of different populations. PSTs tended to overgeneralize commonalities, making statements such as "everyone code-switches" or "we've all been judged on our language" without acknowledging their own privilege as white Standardized English speakers or the more serious discrimination faced by speakers of vernacular dialects, particularly racial minorities.

The PSTs were more likely to acknowledge systems of power and privilege, including white privilege, when our discussion prompts required them to. In the absence of specific references to systems of power and privilege, the PSTs often focused on other aspects of literacy pedagogy, such as in their discussion of how they would teach John Agard's (1985) poem, "Listen Mr Oxford Don," which tended to be framed as a traditional literature lesson with emphasis on the author's style rather than his message. In the later discussions, many PSTs remarked that non-fiction accounts of current linguistic prejudices and systems of privilege, such as the HUD Public Service Announcement about linguistic discrimination, would be more convincing and interesting for high school students than discussions of linguistic discrimination, stereotyping, and privilege in literature. The PSTs seemed to extend their awareness of their own learning progression to the pedagogical strategies and curricular materials they thought would be most successful with their students, particularly white students.

The PSTs also spoke about linguistic discrimination and systems of power and privilege in multiple ways, each of which had different implications for Critical Language Pedagogy. Although all PSTs acknowledged that Standardized English was privileged and seen as superior to other varieties simply because people in power used it, only some PSTs used this critical understanding of SE to call for teaching students to challenge and change existing linguistic prejudices and systems of power. Other PSTs expressed a critical understanding of linguistic discrimination, but then applied this understanding to teaching in problematic ways, suggesting that now that they understood linguistic discrimination, their obligation as teachers of ELA was primarily to teach Standardized English to speakers of vernacular dialects so that their students could gain access to the "codes of power." This finding suggests that developing critical perspectives on language that question language ideologies don't always lead to teaching strategies in line with Critical Language Awareness or Critical Language Pedagogy.

The PSTs responded positively to most design elements of the mini-course as evidenced by the content of their online postings and their evaluation of the course. However, there are a number of features of the course we would change. First, instructor input was absent in the discussions, and we recognize the importance of teachers in Critical Language Awareness programs (as well as in other social justice and anti-racist discussions) to challenge incorrect information, push students to think more critically, and disrupt the white talk that can sterilize these critical discussions. Without an expert teacher educator probing PSTs' assumptions, generalizations, and reasoning, many of the new teachers seemed to stagnate in their development of Critical Language Awareness for teaching, to avert disagreement, and to avoid discussions of white privilege. Without this encouragement, even PSTs with strong sociolinguistic content knowledge tended to agree with each other even when PSTs' comments contained incorrect content knowledge or problematic assumptions about race and privilege.

Second, rather than just asking PSTs how they would teach a particular piece of literature like Agard's poem, we would also ask them to articulate their learning goals. In many cases, the PSTs wrote about making their students "aware" of linguistic discrimination but not helping their students develop strategies to change linguistic discrimination and work toward social justice. By pushing PSTs to consider what they hoped to gain by teaching "awareness" of linguistic discrimination, we believe that they would have been able to consider Critical Language Pedagogy that emphasized praxis and social justice more strongly.

Our study suggests that teaching Critical Language Awareness for teaching to new teachers can be successful, but that it needs to teach pedagogical content knowledge as well as content knowledge about language variation, language ideologies, and systems of power and privilege. Because schools are powerful institutions through which systems of discrimination and privilege are maintained through traditional language pedagogy, schools also hold the power to change such systems and the language ideologies that undergird them through teaching Critical Language Awareness to all students.

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Appendix A. Overview of the language variation mini-course

Module	Theme	Learning goals	Materials/activities	Discussion questions
1	Teaching About Dialects in Literature	Learn about various dialects spoken in the United States. Consider people's attitudes toward various dialects. Learn how to lead discussions about authors' portrayal of vernacular dialects in literature.	Watch the opening of the documentary <i>American Tongues</i> on YouTube. Read "American Varieties," "Myths and Realities" and "What is Standard English?" from <i>Do You Speak American?</i> at pbs.com. Watch YouTube videos about Pittsburgh dialect ("Pittsburghese") and changes in accents in Charlotte, NC. Read "Everyone Has an Accent" by Walt Wolfram (2000).	Choose a myth about language from this week's reading that you have heard or experienced. In what ways would knowing the "reality" of this myth make an ELA teacher more effective at teaching literacy than a teacher who believed the "myth"? Respond to the teaching scenario that asks you to respond to students' negative reactions to the dialects characters use in <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>.
2	Responding to Vernacular Dialects in Student Writing and Speech	Discover grammatical patterns in two vernacular dialects. Consider productive ways to talk with students about the language varieties they use. Help students recognize patterns in different dialects and code-switch/code-mesh in different situations.	Read "Talking about Language Variation With Your Students" (written by the Authors). Do the "A-prefixing" activity for Appalachian English. Do the "A Special Use of BE in African American English" activity. Watch the YouTube video of linguist David Crystal arguing that texting is good for the English language. Read about features of African American English from the University of Hawai'i Sato Center. Watch the YouTube video about the Academic English Mastery program in Los Angeles Unified Schools District.	How would you assess the vernacular grammatical patterns in a student's essay and help her develop her Standardized Written English? Discuss the pros and cons of the Academic English Mastery Program and how you might use this approach in secondary ELA. Respond to the teaching scenario that asks you to respond to students who use Appalachian English grammar and texting language in their academic writing.
3	Leading Discussions and Investigations of Identity and Language Variation	Consider language variation and identity in your own use of language. Design ways for your students to investigate variation and identity in their language use.	Read/view "That's How I Talk" blog created by a teacher and her linguistically diverse English class. Read "Language Variation and Identity" and "Code-Switching and Code-Meshing" (written by the Authors). Watch the YouTube video of Ball State students talking about how they are judged by the language they use.	Discuss a time when you spoke markedly differently from others or a time when you were asked to change the way you spoke. Think about the language you use in formal and informal settings. What are the benefits to using these phrases in certain situations? Respond to the teaching scenario based on the "That's How I Talk" blog. Consider how you would construct an assignment that allows students to investigate identity and language variation in their own lives.

Appendix A (Continued)

Module	Theme	Learning goals	Materials/activities	Discussion questions
4	Teaching About Linguistic Discrimination and Power	Learn about linguistic discrimination in current U.S. society. Plan how to teach students to combat linguistic discrimination and prejudices. Consider how to design curriculum about linguistic diversity, linguistic discrimination, and language and identity for students of varying linguistic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.	Do the “overhearing a heated conversation” activity. Read about linguistic profiling post-Hurricane Katrina at newamericamedia.org. Read and view the poem “Listen Mr Oxford Don” by British-Guyanese poet John Agard. View the video representation of Agard's poem and sample curriculum for teaching the poem. View the Housing and Urban Development Public Service Announcement about linguistic profiling.	Drawing on the activity and readings/viewings about linguistic discrimination, what do you want your students to know about linguistic profiling? How would your goals and approach change depending on your and your students' linguistic and racial identities? How could you teach the poem “Listen Mr Oxford Don” to raise issues of linguistic discrimination, English language variation, and language and identity with your students? What 2–3 major ideas are you taking away from this course for your own teaching?

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