

# “Languaging 101”: Translingual Practices for the Translingual Realities of the SEEK Composition Classroom

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*ABSTRACT: This article uses the translingual turn in composition/rhetoric studies as a springboard to argue for the development of students’ meta-linguistic and meta-rhetorical awareness as it took place for first-year college writers in the local context of a SEEK classroom at a branch college of the City University of New York. I theorize and describe a semester-long assignment sequence that positioned students’ ordinary language repertoires as the primary site of academic inquiry. Students collected linguistic ethnographic information and synthesized it with related research to write case studies that interpret their everyday language and literacy practices from a variety of perspectives. The article offers a close-up on the work of one student in particular.*

*KEYWORDS: translingualism; translanguaging; dialogic pedagogy; first-year writing; basic writing; ethnography; rhetoric; linguistics*

The translingual turn in composition/rhetoric studies has touched upon nearly all aspects of the field.<sup>1</sup> It has changed the way we conduct ethnographic studies of language and literacy practices; it has challenged entrenched assumptions of writing assessment; and it has ushered in new pedagogies that view students’ linguistic repertoires as educational resources to be built upon, instead of deficits to be corrected. However, as critics of the translingual turn have often argued, a translingual approach to college writing has seemingly yet to articulate classroom practices and tools for assessment that instructors can readily apply to their local institutional settings. In the following, I respond to this critique by reporting on an assignment sequence and a set of classroom practices that comprised a first-year composition course, titled “Languaging 101,” that I taught in the fall of 2016 in the

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This article tracks a semester-long writing project that culminates in students composing case studies based in their ethnographic observations of their own linguistic repertoires and those of speakers in their communities. Students then contextualize their observations within relevant research about language and linguistics. This curriculum provides students, especially multilingual ones, with a scaffolded set of assignments that integrates day-to-day language practices with conventionalized academic literacies. With ethnographic explorations of language as the primary mode of inquiry, I frame a set of course-specific learning outcomes that I believe are also entirely scalable to university-wide writing programs.

My model denies that languages exist as stable systems prior to their rhetorical enactment. Students are, therefore, not expected to master a uniform “English,” but rather they are encouraged to develop a meta-vocabulary, what I will call, after Ira Shor, a “third idiom,” for examining the rhetorical and linguistic dimensions of everyday practices and performances. Accordingly, I argue that university-level composition and rhetoric pedagogy should resist the tendency to abstract a singular language from the heterogeneous rhetorical acts that comprise students’ language lives. In developing this site-specific curriculum, I also make a broader case that all institutions could adopt course curricula, classroom practices, and methodologies for student assessment that localize language within the practical conditions of its production and reception. Finally, I claim that the ability to theorize and contextualize the ever-shifting contours of language and literacy is the critical skill that will serve students the most throughout their academic careers and their political lives.

### **Translanguaging and Translingualism**

The notion of “translanguaging” has developed in applied linguistics and bilingual education to describe speakers whose language and literacy practices do not easily collate into the distinct and putatively stable “standard” languages, like Mandarin, Urdu, and English, for example. The ideology of monolingualism quietly maintains standard languages as stable and internally coherent systems of signification in which all speakers are putatively able to participate. In contrast, “translanguaging” articulates a model in which speakers operate from a *holistically integrated linguistic repertoire* that might include a variety of linguistic features traditionally associated

with particular nation-states and language communities. Translanguaging contends that multilingual speakers neither “switch between” nor “mix together” languages. Rather, they strategically select linguistic features from heteroglossic repertoires in response to the situational affordances of different communicative contexts. Two scholars key to the idea of translanguaging, Ofelia García and Li Wei, group these idiosyncratic and syncretic language practices under the general heading of “dynamic bilingualism.” These practices operate “like an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) with individuals using their entire linguistic repertoire to adapt to both the ridges and the craters of communication in uneven (and unequal) interactive terrains” (16). Translanguaging legitimizes as it credits and represents the often unrecognized language and literacy practices that speakers and writers perform in what Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones,” the transcultural and transnational spaces in which “cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). Translanguaging highlights the improvisatory and performative aspects of language, compelling researchers and educators to shift their level of analysis away from how speakers might acquire essentialized “languages” towards how they incorporate and perform language as culturally-bounded on-going practical activity.

Working mostly from within writing studies, Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner see language as a series of praxis-based, rhetorical acts that gain their significance in response to linguistic conventions built up over time. On their account, there is no predetermined set of constitutive rules that define these conventions: conventions persist temporally insofar as speakers performatively enact them. According to Lu and Horner, “The seeming regularities of language can best be understood not as the preexisting rules determining language practices, but, rather, as the product of those practices: an effect of the ongoing process of sedimentation in which engagement of language participates, a process of building up over time” (“Translingual Literacy” 588). This perspective can help students and teachers conceptualize language as always in a mode of *becoming*. Language is a temporalized set of “rules” that speakers create *through* practice as much as they follow *in* practice. A translingual approach emphasizes the rhetorical foundations of everyday language and literacy as it points to the heightened forms of rhetorical dexterity that multilingual speakers often command. Rebecca Lorimer Leonard uses the notion “rhetorical attunement” to stress the rhetoricity of writing across languages. Lorimer Leonard explains that multilingual writers are “tuned

toward the communicative predicaments of multilingual interaction” (228). Multilingual writers in this sense are already expert rhetoricians, strategically negotiating linguistic features in light of audience, genre, and purpose. This idea locates what is often isolated as “language” as an outcome of the strategies that speakers invent and re-create in response to the exigencies of shifting rhetorical situations. Thinking of language as a catch-all term for a series of attempts to attune to and also to challenge received linguistic and literate conventions helps deconstruct the belief that languages coherently exist *prior to* their enactment and performance.

Although translanguaging and translanguaging might seem as an unwarranted attempt to extend post-structural thinking to relatively stable and neutral academic language and literacy practices, I argue that these heteroglossic accounts of multilingualism represent the necessary theoretical correlatives to teaching college-level composition and rhetoric courses in which nearly one hundred percent of students may identify as speakers of languages other than English (LOTEs)—as in the SEEK classes that I describe below. In these courses, the pedagogical methodologies suggested by translanguaging and translanguaging re-embed multilingualism within its rhetorical and cultural conditions of production and reception. This provides students with a space to reflect critically upon the nuanced discursive strategies developed for and through heteroglossic practices.

### **Linguistic Ecologies of the SEEK Composition Classroom**

Founded in 1965 during the wave of mid-20th century progressivism that had been gaining traction throughout the United States, the SEEK program first began at the City College of New York, CUNY, with the goal of providing equal access to Black and largely Puerto Rican students to the then flagship university of the entire CUNY system. Now available at all the four-year colleges throughout CUNY, SEEK’s stated mission is “to provide comprehensive academic support to assist capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to their educational and financial circumstances.” In order to qualify for SEEK, students must both have “an admissions index score that is below the cut point for regular admissions to a particular senior college” and a family income that comes in below certain financial thresholds mandated by SEEK. For example, currently a family of two needs to make less than \$29,637; a family of three, \$37,296; and a family of four, \$44,995 (*SEEK*). Although these income thresholds remain well above the federal poverty line, they illustrate a stark image of life in New

York City, a city defined by its prohibitively expensive rental market and its exorbitant cost of living and are furthermore indicative of the general working-class background of SEEK students.

Drawing nearly exclusively from New York City's public high schools, SEEK primarily serves a population comprised of first generation, 1.5 generation, or second generation students. These students bring rich language histories to the classroom, possessing the linguistic skills and rhetorical dexterity required to navigate the communicative demands of day-to-day multilingualism in New York City. In response to a survey I conducted on the first day of class of my fall 2016 course, 19 out of 22 students reported speaking a LOTE. Out of these 19 students, 14 students reported that they spoke Spanish; 2 Bengali; 1 Mandarin; and 1 Arabic. These numbers demonstrate the multilingualism that generally characterizes my SEEK classroom. To further illustrate this point: in response to a similar poll taken in my summer 2017 SEEK course, which attempted to account for students who identified as speaking two or more LOTEs, 12 students reported that they spoke Spanish; 4 French; 3 Arabic; 2 Bengali; 2 Urdu; 1 Ewe; 1 Haitian Creole; 1 Hindi; 1 Mandarin; 1 Russian; and 1 Wolof. Such a pronounced multilingual presence in classrooms like mine might often trigger a "standard" composition and rhetoric pedagogy, verging on an ESL form of skill-and-drill approaches to grammar. My translanguaging pedagogy, however, locates such language diversity and the rhetorical acts that compose it as the primary experiential "text," which students interpret both in class dialogue and through the lenses of academic literacies. This approach aligns with the social justice goals of the SEEK program by acknowledging a student population who has largely lived their language lives between and beyond the borders of standard languages.

There is an undeniable presence of linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity in the SEEK composition classroom. This fact, coupled with students' general working-class background, often marks SEEK students as "basic" or "developmental" writers, even though they are enrolled in same first-year composition sequence as non-SEEK John Jay students. In the language of CUNY, the designation of "SEEK" is often pejorative. It signifies a student population that inhabits a borderlands somewhere between the fully "mainstream" curriculum of CUNY's four-year campuses and the labyrinth of remedial courses at CUNY's two-year colleges. The non-dominant and translanguaging profiles of SEEK students often impels a writing pedagogy that intends for students to first master a universalized "English" before moving onto more complex conceptual tasks like rhetorical analysis. A translanguaging approach undoes these linguistic prejudices and aligns itself with the

founding intentions of basic writing, as inaugurated by Mina Shaughnessy at SEEK’s inception at the City College of New York, CUNY, in 1965. As John Trimbur aptly notes, translanguaging does not constitute a novel idea in the field, but rather a continuation of a disciplinary and pedagogical attention to language difference that relates back “to the City University of New York (CUNY) and the formation of basic writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, when open admissions precipitated a new kind of reading on the part of composition teachers and a new understanding of what error or language differences might mean” (220). Such a pedagogy that Trimbur describes was one of the first to ask instructors to view their students as language practitioners and innovators instead of language rule-followers or rule-breakers. The first basic writing scholars rallied around this rejection of belletristic models of composition, and the translanguaging turn in composition/rhetoric studies, in many ways, can be best understood as a linguistic exposition of this way reading student work.

In this vein, translanguaging responds to “default” composition and rhetoric pedagogies that divide and delegitimize students’ linguistic proficiency against a privileged variety of English. The ideology of monolingualism that locates languages as a set of discretely-bounded and internally uniformed systems underpins this division and further reifies a monolithic “English” as the boundary stone that divides the college composition and rhetoric classroom from the language and literacy practices of everyday life. Paul Kei Matsuda labels this tacit yet operative force of monolingualism the “policy of linguistic containment,” arguing, “the first-year composition course has been a site of linguistic containment, quarantining from the rest of higher education students who have not yet been socialized into dominant linguistic practices” (641). What holds true for “mainstream” composition courses I wager holds doubly true for SEEK composition courses: without concerted effort to the contrary, students’ non-dominant and translanguaging profiles coupled with their racialized identities compels a false imperative for a “back-to-basics” approach to writing education.

Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa describe such a phenomenon as the effect of “raciolinguistic ideologies,” a term that they use to highlight how, no matter how closely minoritized students strive to align their linguistic repertoires to “standard usage,” their racialized identities relegate their language to a subaltern status unrecognizable to what Asao Inoue describes as a “white racial habitus” (10). Describing “standard usage,” Flores and Rosa argue, “non-racialized people are able to deviate from these idealized linguistic practices and enjoy the embrace of mainstream institutions while

racialized people can adhere to these idealized linguistic practices and still face profound institutional exclusion based on the perceptions of the white listening subject” (165). This idea suggests that speakers’ racialized bodies might very well construct rhetorical ethos more than their linguistic capacities. On this account, what has been traditionally taken as “extra” linguistic features actually yields “intra” linguistic meaning. A translingual approach builds on this idea and grounds language practices within the ideological and corporeal orientations of production and reception.

In line with recent scholarship on translingualism, my course aims at a series of learning objectives derived from viewing “language (including varieties of Englishes, discourses, media, or modalities) as performative: not something we have but something we do” and “all communicative practices as mesopolitical acts, actively negotiating and constituting complex relations of power at the dynamic intersection of the social-historical (macro) and the personal (micro) levels” (Lu and Horner, “Introduction” 28). I describe below how this translingual starting point re-focuses composition towards meta-linguistic and meta-rhetorical awareness as its main pedagogical objective and away from code-acquisition models that favor, tacitly or overtly, the mastery of a singular, privileged variety of English.

### **Starting with Language: Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogies**

In response to the translingual reality of the SEEK composition classroom, my pedagogy positions students as critical interpreters of their everyday language resources by making inquiry into multilingualism the central theme of the course. My curriculum draws its inspiration from H. Samy Alim’s notion of Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies (CHHLPs). In Alim’s conception, CHHLPs “view the school as a primary site of language ideological combat, and begins with efforts to uncover and understand the complex and conflicting language ideologies within particular educational institutions” (“Critical Hip-Hop” 164). For Alim, an emphasis on students’ material language as a pedagogy’s prime subject matter surfaces the classroom as an already contested linguistic setting. Students with minoritized linguistic practices must constantly negotiate their language resources in light of monolingual institutional conventions and policies. Alim sees CHHLPs as a pedagogical tool to prompt students to become chroniclers of the linguistic struggles that are already taking place in the educational institutions in which they find themselves. This type of education optimizes class dialogue and community-centered writing projects to frame everyday

language as a serious matter of inquiry. After the dialogic examination of language ideologies already present in the classroom, CHHLPs uses the theoretical nomenclatures co-developed by teachers and students in order to “encourage students to become ethnographers and collect their own speech data from local communities” (“Critical Hip-Hop” 167). Through self-reflexive analysis of their own language repertoires and community-driven ethnographic writing, CHHLPs reposition linguistically marginalized students as active language investigators instead of passive language learners.

Underlying this shift resides the belief that students already possess profoundly nuanced understandings of language and rhetoric and their socio-political, cultural, and material implications. The pedagogical task for educators, then, is to develop students’ implicit knowledge of their practical language and rhetorical mastery already in play to a level of explicit awareness.

Combined with translanguaging, this approach has the potential to reframe fundamentally institutional-wide writing program learning outcomes and the ways in which college-level composition and rhetoric instructors teach “basic” or “developmental” writers. By the same hand, it can bring critical attention to how monolingual ideologies can tacitly use students’ racialized bodies and non-dominant translanguaging profiles as an excuse to quarantine them off from “mainstream” first-year composition courses. Instead of the unidirectional acquisition of standardized “English” as one of the primary objectives of a composition curriculum or a writing program, instructors and WPAs, I argue, can educate and assess for students’ meta-linguistic awareness and meta-rhetorical awareness. These forms of awareness are the abilities to explicate embedded linguistic and rhetorical knowledges, make analytical interventions in them, and situate such knowledges within the political economies of their everyday use. A pedagogy focused on the critical inquiry into language can also help challenge the student-deficit model of learning and replace it with an asset or experiential model that authenticates students’ linguistic repertoires both as legitimate themes for academic inquiry and as an effective tool for class dialogue and the writing process.

### **The “Translatable” Writing Curriculum at John Jay**

Utilizing John Jay’s institutional-wide inquiry-driven composition curriculum, awarded the CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence in 2012-13, students in my particular course write case studies in which they

first collect ethnographic descriptions by reflecting upon their own linguistic identities and from reporting on the language practices of their communities; they then go on to synthesize this information with research literature on language and linguistics. Describing John Jay's curricular model for composition courses, Mark McBeth and Tim McCormack write, "Using scaffolded assignments, reflective writing, and a rhetorical focus, this curricular design engages students in deep revision as they compose for diverse audiences in diverse contexts" (43). In the first semester of this two-semester sequence, students create a writing portfolio that models the stages of composing an inquiry-driven research project. Instead of persuasive, thesis-driven writing, the assignments ask students to employ the writing process as tool for discovery and critical exploration of topics in light of secondary research. At John Jay, instructors have the overt leeway to premise the above curricular design around a variety of themes. However, the following core curricula structure is standardized throughout John Jay's first semester writing course:

- *Personal narrative*: Students use the course section's unique theme as lens to write about their own first-hand experiences.
- *Research proposal*: Students reflect upon their narratives' motifs in order to develop potential research questions and lines of inquiry.
- *Annotated bibliography*: Students summarize and interrogate sources that they find in response to the ideas set out in their proposals.
- *Scripted interview*: Students have two choices: they can either (i) write a fictional conversation between the sources in their annotated bibliographies; or (ii) they can interview an expert on their topic.
- *Outline*: Students write a blueprint for their draft that allows them map out their ideas for the first draft.
- *First draft research paper*: Students use writing as an epistemological tool: they begin to synthesize the research they have so far collected.
- *Second draft of research paper*: Students shape their ideas into a more fine-tuned form and also engage explicitly the conventions of academic discourse.
- *Reflective portfolio cover letter*: Students review all their assignments from the course and reflect upon their progress.

When I began teaching at John Jay in the fall semester of 2014 as a Graduate Teaching Fellow, this standardized curriculum provided me with a much-

needed road map to follow. As a brand-new college writing instructor, I did not even know that composition/rhetoric studies existed as a field at the time. When I began my doctoral studies, I was early modern scholar, and I arrived to my first day of class with the belief that I was about to teach what amounted to a literature course: we would read literary texts, discuss them, and students would write essays about them—practices to which I had grown accustomed in my years of academic training. However, this literature-based model quickly fell apart. I realized that the most perceptive discussions in class happened when we left the assigned text behind altogether. The energy in the room shifted and students’ eyes lit up when we kicked around ideas at the margins of established academic discourse: the poor lighting inside most CUNY classrooms or our daily commutes on the MTA. From these average everyday beginnings, our “small talk” often changed into charged dialogues revolving around the politics and promises of being a working-class college student. I started to wonder what a first-year composition course would look like that got rid of mandated course texts and only focused on interpreting the texts of everyday life.

In the subsequent semesters, I tinkered with the official course title and the exact sequence of the assignments. I experimented with such themes as life in New York City and a meta-exploration of inquiry itself; I flipped the outline and put it in between the drafts, so students could reverse engineer and organize the ideas that they wrote from one draft to another. Then, in the spring semester of 2016, I took part in Ofelia García’s graduate seminar on translanguaging at the Graduate Center, CUNY, where the Ph.D. students were asked to write a case study that revolved around the empirical implications of the linguistic theories we were learning.

Through taking this course, I realized John Jay’s standardized first-year composition curriculum could provide students with a clear-cut curricular framework that they could use in order to write a language-focused case study: I had the hunch that I could “translate”—both in form and content—what I was learning with Ofelia to the undergraduate classroom. In choosing my fall 2016 course’s theme of “languaging,” my goal was to put into praxis with my students what I, as a student, was studying myself. As both an adjunct and then graduate student, my shift of John Jay’s standardized FYC curriculum towards “languaging” afforded me the chance to implement a series of learning outcomes at odds with tacit institutional goals of language normalization. Drawing on John Jay’s assignment sequence, I situate the personal narrative and the scripted interview as methods for the collection of ethnographic descriptions. In the proposal, students derive inquiry

questions from these first two assignments in order to conduct secondary research. Finally, students use these two assignments as primary texts that they will interpret in composing the final research project for the course in the form of an ethnographic case study.

### **A Dialogic Model: Composing the Third Idiom**

Ira Shor argues that “skills developed through consideration of an experiential problem will make education an ongoing process of life—a state of being rather than a course in an institution” (*Critical Teaching* 105). To start with students’ authentic language means *both* to start with highly idiosyncratic situations *and* with an examination of the public political rhetorics that regulate everyday life. The translingual turn provides a praxis for starting with a critical notion of experience, since it asks educators to root language in its lived performance and reception, instead of abstracting out a stable, atemporal body of linguistic knowledge. A pedagogical scaffolding that invites students to see language as an embodied know-how—a *savoir-faire*—comprises a first step in establishing the students’ ongoing language and literacy practices as a credible theme for serious class inquiry.

I often use class dialogue to ask students to reflect on the rhetorical and linguistic aspects of the daily social practices that make up life in New York City—ordering a cup coffee with cream and two sugars at a bodega, the do’s and don’t’s of taking the 7 train, the cultural milieu of the South Bronx. Students quickly make nuanced observations regarding these practices and readily identify their unwritten but normative roles and scripts. However, they often seem reluctant to label their ability to negotiate these linguistic practices as anything other than “common sense,” something quite undistinguished in light of institutionally legitimized knowledges. In other words, students most often struggle to *theorize* these experiences. They lack the habits of mind needed to develop a meta-vocabulary through which they can analyze and critique everyday practices. My translingual pedagogy intervenes in order to provide students with tools for developing meta-vocabularies for theorizing the languages in which their lives are already enmeshed.

Languaging, a term which can be dated back to its appearance in sociology in the 70s (Maturana and Valerie) and which has recently entered the disciplinary discourse of composition/rhetoric studies, provides my course a conceptual starting point for implementing this learning outcome. The forward force of the tensed term “languaging”—its felt but perhaps implicit

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meaning—fosters inquiry into the practical and embodied senses of language while muting the power of the unmoving substantive “language” to control linguistic rules and conventions. “Languaging” written on the board prompts students to ask, “Is that a *real* word?,” a gateway question into discussing the relationship between linguistic innovation and rhetorical ethos. Both in form and content, languaging motivates student to wonder what language *is* and *who* has the power to make that call. Students frequently point out upon seeing the word that if they wrote “languaging” in a paper it would be marked as an error, but when I write it on the board, with my authority as instructor, it is seen as a creative innovation.

Although “Languaging 101” is already written in the heading of the syllabus before the first day begins, my students and I spend the first few classes hashing out possible meanings of languaging and the possible trajectories of the course. I like to broadcast to my students that, even as a scholar immersed in the research literature, I still cannot give a finished definition of languaging, that the power of the term lies in its radical openness, and that their input as students can only actively contribute to shaping its definition and use. In composing their own definitions of languaging, students begin to see the course as authentically their own, a curriculum not of key words to be memorized but of concepts to be theorized together as a community.

To begin discussing languaging in class, I first ask students to work together in small groups to account for what meaningful effects the “-ing” ending creates when added to the end of a word. I write pairs such as “work” and “working” and “She talks” and “She’s talking” on the board. I then ask students, without yet giving linguistic explanations, to work out an account of these differences of each pair in their groups that they then can report to rest of the class. I also use this classroom activity as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their expertise in LOTEs, by inviting students to think about linguistic structures similar to the English “-ing” ending in other languages. Students most often volunteer the -ando/-iendo endings in Spanish, as in the difference between “Habla” and “Está hablando.” This acknowledgement of LOTEs further seeks to authenticate students as established expert language users, capable of comparative linguistics. It also sets the translingual trajectory of the course, setting up student-generated meta-descriptions of language as one of the very first classroom activities.

After the class has dialogically worked out a provisional definition of the “-ing” ending and its linguistic force, I can now pose a new problem to the class. With students still in their small groups, I write “language” on one side of the board, and “languaging” on the other. Then, I invite students to

discover, by using their initial theories regarding the “-ing” ending, what “linguaging” might mean and how its meaning might differ from the traditional term “language.” This classroom activity establishes what Shor describes as a “third idiom.” In Shor’s account, the third idiom constitutes the class discourse that transpires when teachers and students strive to bracket out their pre-conceived notions of what counts as appropriate and inappropriate discourse in the classroom (*Empowering Education*). Whether or not it is actually possible to rid the classroom of the discursive prejudices held by students and teachers alike remains highly questionable. However, the *attempt* to bracket them fosters a critical self-reflexive stance of speaking and listening in the classroom and focuses the class’s attention on composing *ad hoc* vocabularies from and for the existential particularities of any course. On Shor’s account, the third idiom brings language to the forefront of the class, inaugurating students as co-authors of terminology and frameworks needed to generate successful inquiry. On my account, the third idiom comprises the terms that students and teachers generate out of experience in order to better understand *that* experience: both ways, the third idiom is self-reflexive and dialogic, drawing on the linguistic practices that students and teachers bring to class. As a discursive amalgam, it discovers a vocabulary of familiar words, rhetorics, and ideas used to understand these selfsame words, rhetorics, and ideas in unfamiliar ways. The third idiom draws upon linguaging acts to springboard class dialogue, which nominates both teachers and students to compose from first-hand access and account.

Students further their conceptions of linguaging as developed in the course’s first two assignments as they continue to collect primary data from their own experience. The overt instruction to students is that they can use the *full range* of their linguistic repertoire. This hopes to foster a critical stance toward monolingualism as an ideology institutionalized in the college composition classroom which relegates non-elite Englishes, and all LOTEs, to the margins. The work of one student, Genesis Urbaez, detailed below, opened up particularly strong and consistently deepened throughout the semester as she continued to develop a meta-vocabulary—her third idiom—to explore the types of bilingualism she and her mother exercise on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Context for Bilingualism**

*Thinking Through Ethnography:* During the last week of class, I take my students to the SEEK computer lab, so they can work on their final projects and receive direct feedback during the writing process. Each day soon after

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we walked in, Genesis called me over to ask for direct feedback on her work; she wanted to be sure that she was getting it *right*. So we would sit there in the cramped rows of aging desktops, with wall-mounted rotating fans whirling in the background, going over of her paragraphs, sentence by sentence. The case-study project seemed to speak to her: she appeared ready to take the curricular structure as a chance to learn more about her life and her family, her language and her identity.

In hopes of assessing the successes and the pitfalls of this experiential and language centered approach to pedagogy, I asked Genesis to reflect upon her experiences in the post-course interviews that I often conduct with students for participant-feedback on my teaching practices. These interviews are quite low-stakes: I ask students what worked for them and what didn't, and I try to see if I can catch a glimmer of the hoped-for learning outcomes in their responses. In one particular interview, I wanted to get an idea of how well Genesis took to the notion of languaging and whether it helped or hindered the general experiential approach of my pedagogy. Genesis, along with 11 other students out of the 22 total from my fall 2016 101 course, also had elected to take my spring 2017 201 course, so I had the chance to observe her development as a writer and a thinker over a full academic year. Early in our 201 course with “Languaging 101” still fresh in our memories, Genesis and I sat down after a class for an interview in order to reflect about the successes and the failures of our prior course together.

In the interview, Genesis identified the initial class dialogues on locating lived experience through languaging as one of the more challenging aspects of the course. She also pointed out how task-oriented group work helped students reflect critically about their language lives. Genesis told me: “After we did all the group work that really helped everybody getting their ideas together: ‘Okay, you think this is what languaging is—maybe this is good.’ Then, we put it all together, and we finally figured out what we’re trying to say what languaging is. But only in the beginning...we didn’t really know what we were getting ourselves into.” Genesis’s comments reveal the intellectual labor she and other students undertook in order to develop a theoretical vocabulary from the ground up, the beginnings of a third idiom derived from and for the language that is lived in the seemingly mundane routines of everyday life. Her remarks also show that working through highly-scaffolded conceptual problems can foster an epistemological framing of the classroom as community. Clearly, the introduction of the unfamiliar and academic term “languaging” comprised for Genesis an overt direction preventing a completely holistic epistemology from taking hold over

the course. At the same time, this move helped coordinate group dialogue toward yet-to-be-determined ideas, likewise prompting students to move past receiving the class to actively co-creating core concepts. By offering students languaging as an open-ended neologism in need of definition, the course authorized students as genuine stakeholders. It situated students' own language repertoires as the central course content.

Genesis demonstrated the type of critical inquiry fostered in class dialogue on languaging in her autobiography. In this assignment, students reflect upon the roles that language plays in their lives, both on a practical level and as a formative influence upon their identities. These goals lead it to resemble the "language portfolio" often used in K-12 settings of bilingual education programs in the New York City public schools. These projects comprise: "a way for students to record and celebrate their language learning and cultural experiences over time" and "a place for students to describe their experiences in different languages and with different cultures," which, as such, makes the assignment open-ended enough for *all* students, including students who identify as monolingual, to analyze their own linguistic and cultural experiences (CUNY-NYSIEB, 23). Most often, students in my SEEK courses use the languaging autobiography as space to recount and interpret how they first learned English.

For the entire course, Genesis used her writing as a way to reflect upon how her language life told the story of her relationship with her mother and their migration from New York City to the Dominican Republic and back again. In her opening paragraph, Genesis narrates:

My mother was not economically stable when I was young. Right after I was born we moved to the Dominican Republic. My mom and dad divorced, so my mother decided to take off to the United States with me when I was about one year old. We used to stay in someone's home, where she rented a room. We lived there for a short period of time until my mom got back on her feet. When she did, we got our own apartment. Since my mom was now economically stable she was able to afford a lot of things she couldn't before. She was able to buy a television with cable. I spent a lot of time watching television, I watched shows like Barney and Sesame Street. I learned a lot of English watching those shows. By the time I was 4 and had entered school I knew English perfectly.

Instead of approaching language as an abstract set of rules to be de-contextually acquired, Genesis’s writing shows how she interprets an early language-learning experience in terms of a web of social, cultural, and material conditions. Building from our class dialogue on languaging, Genesis employs the term as a self-reflexive interpretive framework: capacious enough to encompass essential features of her upbringing and identity and narrow enough to provide her with a focused set of experiences to think through.

Genesis in turn used the second primary-data assignment, the interview, to understand how her mother learned English both formally in the Dominican Republic and informally on the job in New York City. In the introduction to her interview, Genesis describes her mother’s first experiences of learning English in the Dominican Republic:

My mother, Maria Peña, was born in the Dominican Republic in 1962. She grew up in a small town called Jimaní, in a Spanish speaking home. All she spoke was Spanish, until she went to a Institute to learn English. She was 31 years old when she started learning English. It was difficult for her because all her life all she knew was Spanish. Listening to music helped her a lot. She used to write down the lyrics to English songs and go over them.

In this pre-interview description of her mother, Genesis uses the same framework that she used in her languaging autobiography to understand her own language learning experience to interpret a particular language learning experience of her mother’s in a new light. Both her languaging autobiography and her interview show Genesis situating her and her mother’s language lives within their family’s history, and their family’s history, in turn, within their language lives.

Genesis adeptly continues this line of inquiry during her interview that she recorded with her mother, which I have transcribed below:

**Genesis:** Do you consider yourself to be bilingual?

**Maria:** Yes, it doesn’t matter that I have accent in English. But I’m bilingual.

**Genesis:** What does being bilingual mean to you?

**Maria:** For me, bilingual means a lot of thing. Because with my language I can help a lot of people in my job.

**Genesis:** What’s your job and how does being bilingual help you?

**Maria:** My job is—I’m a teacher assistant. And I have a lot of parents that don’t speak English.

**Genesis:** How did you learn English?

**Maria:** I learn English in the Dominican Republic, years ago before I come here, in 1992. And I know how to write, I know how to read—everything. I love English.

**Genesis:** Do you feel like you're fluent in both languages?

**Maria:** No, I'm fluent in my language but I'm not fluent in English. I can talk, I can read, I can write, but I'm not fluent. I know.

**Genesis:** Why do you feel like that?

**Maria:** Because that's true! (**Laughter**). I have an accent because I didn't learn English here. I learn English when I was a grown, a big, a grown woman—

**Genesis:** A teenager?

**Maria:** A teenager? No, a big woman.

**Genesis:** What makes you want to know English?

**Maria:** Because I need it in my job. And, sometimes, when I go by myself to the doctor appointment or some place, I don't understand what the people say. That's the reason that right now I'm going to City College, taking reading and writing.

**Genesis:** Why is being bilingual important in community?

**Maria:** Because in my community there are a lot of people from different countries and different cultures, so that's the reason that everybody need to speak English and another language.

From a composition standpoint, Genesis establishes a thematic link with the self-reflection she performed in her languaging autobiography. The interview affords her the chance to practice in a new genre the analytical tools and interpretative frameworks around languaging that she developed in the first assignment. The questions that Genesis poses in this interview exhibit her skill set of thematizing an area of inquiry, in this case that of bilingualism, and of asking relevant questions that open the subject-matter to different interpretive perspectives. From a critical standpoint, Genesis's questions and Maria's answers highlight a nascent inquiry into unqualified notions of bilingualism. Instead of viewing being bilingual as a neutral linguistic capacity, Genesis's line of questioning contextualizes bilingualism as a series of site-based, context-bound language practices seen in terms of labor, community, and migration. One can witness a shift here from language-as-object to language-as-practice in this exchange, as Genesis roots language in its material conditions of production. The relationships between labor, community, and migration were all themes that Genesis would also take

up in her proposal and explore during her research in the library in order to write her case study.

*Shifting to the Library:* From these two primary-data assignments, students generate short research proposals in which they invent themes along with relevant research questions based on their languaging autobiographies and their interviews. The proposal functions as the “hinge” assignment in the curriculum that bridges students’ ethnographic writing on their first-person experiences with language and the experiences of others in their communities to the research that they will conduct in the library. Students often find this rhetorical move troublesome, because it pushes them to codify implicit thoughts and intuitions orbiting around languaging into objectively defined research questions. In general, students ask questions that are either too big: “What’s the relationship between language and culture?” or too small: “How many Arabic speakers are there in Queens?” in order to generate productive research results. Genesis, though, soon showed a clear grasp of how to come up with “mid-sized” questions to focus her inquiry.

In our interview, Genesis described the process of moving from this first-person, experiential mode to generating research questions for the proposal assignment: “I had to basically figure out what my main point was in all of it. So with my autobiography and with the interview I had to figure out: ‘Okay, so how do they connect, and what’s like the big picture?’” As Genesis’s remark shows, the proposal asks students to find large-scale connections between their languaging autobiographies and their interviews, then orient these connections towards future inquiry. She explains: “I saw the connection with the interview and my autobiography. So I was like: ‘Okay, so how can I make one idea with those two [the interview and the autobiography], and connect it with the research I’m about to do?’” Genesis shows that ethnographic writing can locate students’ own language as course content to be conceptualized. It also signals her emergent rhetorical ethos: here, she articulates the rhetorical steps of the research process as clearly as her other written work adeptly performed very similar steps.

The following excerpt from Genesis’s proposal likewise reveals her developing aptitude for posing research questions derived from the ethnography of her languaging autobiography and interview:

My research question is, does being bilingual benefit someone financially? Another question that goes along with that is, does it depend on how fluent you are in both languages? A person may speak two languages but can be fluent in one and speak the other

with an accent. I want to know if someone's opportunity can be affected if they speak their second language with an accent. My last question is, does the second language you speak help you get opportunities? Being bilingual can open many doors, but I want to know if it depends on what language you speak.

Genesis's proposal evinces a clear thematic parallel to her interview with her mother. In the interview, Maria suggests that she is not "fluent" in English because of her accent, despite expressing confidence in the efficacy of her language and literacy practices. In this excerpt, Genesis takes a critical stance against facile narratives that present a simplistic connection between bilingualism and its advantages in the labor market. Genesis acknowledges that indeed being bilingual might aid someone's job hunt but also interrogates what kinds of bilingualism have value in the labor market. She now develops a concrete and objective line of inquiry that she can begin to answer through secondary research and that will possibly provide her with a new understanding of how language's relationship to labor plays out concretely in her and her mother's lives.

After the proposal, students go on to write the research component of their case studies. We spend a class in the library going over research methods, and students write annotated bibliographies that summarize the sources that they found in response to the inquiry questions set out in their proposals. The most difficult part of the assignment sequence comes next: when I ask students to apply the insights they garnered from their secondary sources to understand the primary data that they collected in their languaging autobiographies and their interviews in a new light. Such a rhetorical task can present a challenge even for seasoned researchers, and I found myself struggling to break down into concrete steps the hermeneutic procedure by which writers interpret a dataset in terms of a particular theory. Genesis, however, incisively summarized this process as: "For some [research sources], this [research] is explaining exactly what I'm talking about, and for others [i.e. other sources] the research is the main topic and then the autobiography might be explaining what the research is really trying to say." The chiasmic arrangement of Genesis's remark reveals the dialectical nature of synthesizing primary and secondary sources: in some instances, the secondary literature helps researchers better understand their primary data set. In others, the primary data set helps them understand the research in new and innovative ways.

Genesis’s insight points to the main learning objective of the total assignment sequence: students’ development of a second-order, meta-vocabulary for analyzing and re-contextualizing their language repertoires and linguistic ecologies in new ways. In the introduction to the final draft of her case study, Genesis sets out her new interpretive framework in the final draft of her case study, re-reading the interview with her mother and her secondary research differently:

After the interview I started asking myself why does being bilingual help someone get better job opportunities, does it depend on how fluent you are when speaking the languages, and do the languages you speak help you get different types of job opportunities. Researchers found that being bilingual can lead to higher pay and that some jobs require for you to be fluent in all aspects of both languages.

In this passage, Genesis continues to refine and specify the line of inquiry that she initially set out in her research proposal, narrowing her research questions down even further to focus on the possible economic advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism in the labor market. In answering this research question, Genesis also begins to explore the notion of language “fluency” and how it relates to a potential employee’s job prospects. Genesis writes that her mother:

can speak, read, and write in English but not on a level to say that she is fluent. Despite not being fluent in English, she was still able to get a job because of her bilingual skills. But, not every career place is like the one my mother works in. Different jobs call for different levels of fluency in the languages a person speaks. According to West (2010), for a specific job you might need to be fluent when speaking both languages but in another one it might be important to write or be able to translate both languages (p. 21). In other words, not all jobs require the same level of fluency in a person’s first or second language. The big picture is that the area someone is fluent in may need to vary in order to use two languages everyday at work.

Genesis here enacts the rhetorical moves needed to make sense of one source in light of another. Her paragraph first paraphrases her interview with her mother, then summarizes a secondary research source, and finally synthesizes the two into an original conclusion derived equally from both sources.

Again, students found this part of the assignment sequence most challenging: they struggled to incorporate vastly different discursive conventions of auto-ethnographic reflection and interviews with academic research literacies. Despite these difficulties, I believe this assignment sequence's initial emphasis on auto-ethnography and other ethnographic data helps ground students where they already had a stake. Although students in this course still had troubles with navigating electronic databases, scholarly journals, and academic citation styles, they seemed to feel, as Genesis's experience makes clear, more connected with the writing process and the content of the course as these centered on conceptualizing and researching the language and literacy practices already in play for them in their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching my translingual first-year composition course in the SEEK program at John Jay College prompted students to develop meta-linguistic and meta-rhetorical awareness through research into actual language and literacy practices which became the object of analytical reflection. Although the translingual turn in composition/rhetoric studies has provided my course with a theoretical backdrop to implement a pedagogy concerned with the development of such forms of awareness, this outcome aligns with long-standing critical attention to the material, cultural, and social antecedents of language and literacy practices, dating back to the passage of *Students' Rights to Their Own Language* in 1974.

To base a writing course on languaging and the linguistic diversity present in SEEK calls for acknowledging LOTE and the multilingual lives that these students lead, including how these lives interact with the institutionalized norms of the college composition classroom. As Ricardo Otheguy, Wallis Reed, and Ofelia García argue, "The *difference* between monolinguals and bilinguals is that monolinguals are allowed to deploy all or most of their lexical and structural repertoire mostly freely, whereas bilinguals can only do so in the safety of environments that are sheltered from the prescriptive power of named languages" (295). To explore language in a way that moves beyond the study of formalized rules and conventions, it is imperative to ask students to think about how rhetorical situations and institutional spaces set the standard for appropriate or inappropriate language and literacy acts. Overtly acknowledging and encouraging LOTE as an acceptable language resource for course writing and themes for investigation opens up the class-

room as a space of critical inquiry and encourages students to develop their own rhetorical ethos as language investigators.

As the archives of the *Journal Basic of Writing* readily affirm, there has been no shortage of basic writing studies that advocate for students' everyday language and literacy practices as legitimate and highly nuanced forms of linguistic and rhetorical practice. A founding principle of basic writing studies is that there is nothing “basic” about basic writers and the skills they already have in hand. However, these arguments have continually lost ground to reductive notions of language and literacy made in the name of austerity and standardization—we simply do not have the time nor the money to teach anything but the “basics.” If the translingual turn presents anything new to basic writing studies, it is an argument theoretically nuanced enough to champion a cause that has long been vitally evident to those of us who teach daily in basic writing classrooms: language only comes from the flesh-and-blood speakers who preform it, who embody it, who live in and through it. The recent emphasis on “languaging” in the field of composition/rhetoric studies suggests, I hope, a renewal of the belief that language is best understood in terms of its material and ideological conditions of production and reception. By moving away from “language” and towards “languaging,” the translingual turn can help us realize that *to language* means to convey oneself in the world, to pick up the rhetorical and linguistic tools at hand, and to work within or against their historical conventions of use.

The pedagogical focus of my above-described course argues that students already know how to language, that they language every day, and that classroom discourse itself comprises a highly nuanced and complex form of languaging. As composition and rhetoric educators, our labor, then, consists of developing pedagogical techniques that bring explicit attention to languaging in all its forms: classroom practices and assignments that invite our students to reflect deeply upon their own authentic language and literacy practices and that prompt them to develop sophisticated and analytical vocabularies to describe these practices. Finally, this form of composition and rhetoric education, I suggest, distances itself from the tacit yet extremely potent rhetoric of neoliberalism which today positions the university as a minimalist commercial enterprise, where students purchase isolated skills one course at a time, in a society where standardized “English” is a type of cultural capital that only a select few are enabled to legitimately possess.

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## Notes

1. This article is an expanded version of a paper I gave at the Council on Basic Writing's featured session at CCCC 2017 entitled, "Emerging Voices in Basic Writing Studies."
2. Genesis and her mother, Maria Peña, asked to have their full names included in this article.

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