

Using Case Studies for Training WPAs in SLW Issues: A Dialogic Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by a need to provide WPAs-in-training with more practice and experience-oriented resources for supporting second language writers, this article shares a case study module in which students strategically respond to a hypothetical conflict related to grammar instruction and linguistic diversity. Specifically, we provide background information (including relevant scholarly references), a hypothetical scenario, implementation guidelines, and two sample responses to the conflict from experienced WPAs, all of which can be used for WPA preparation or professional growth. We frame the case study through our discussions of the activity's educational goals, our reflections on our own responses to the case study, and a rationale for the value of adopting a case study approach to WPA training.

INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous publications on the intersection between writing program administration and second language writing (SLW) (e.g., Matsuda, 2012; Miller-Cochran, 2010; Shuck, 2006; Tardy, 2011), pedagogical resources that can prepare graduate students and future WPAs to face SLW-related challenges are limited (see Matsuda, 2012; Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, & Lamm, 2006; Miller-Cochran, 2010; Sánchez-Martín & Walker, 2022). If writing programs do not adequately account for language diversity among the students they serve, the consequences for students from marginalized language backgrounds can range from not understanding culturally specific texts to being dismissed from the institution. These students may have little co-curricular language support and be unfairly penalized for unconventional grammar, have insufficient time to complete assignments, or have strengths and knowledge that go unrecognized. As Miller-Cochran (2010) argues, WPAs have a responsibility to ensure that instructors in their programs are prepared for the complexities of a linguistically diverse student population. However, many WPAs have not had in-depth discussions of those complexities. To address this gap, we present a case study approach to WPA training in SLW issues as a low-risk, high-impact strategy for

providing experiential learning opportunities. Case studies offer hypothetical scenarios inspired from real-world challenges, the responses to which are developed collaboratively using existing scholarship.

In the case study module below, developed by Anuj, graduate students or workshop attendees role-play responses to a hypothetical conflict between pro- and anti-grammar teaching at their institution. In addition to the scenario, we include guidelines on how to use the scenario in a graduate-level class, along with a bibliography, reflective questions, and guiding responses from two senior WPAs, Chris and Gail, who specialize in SLW. Our collaboration brings together various perspectives and experiences: Anuj (the developer of the case study) is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition with writing program administration experience in India; Gail is the director of English Language Support Programs at her university, working closely with writing programs to advocate for second language writers; and Chris has writing program administration experience specifically supporting second language writers in first-year writing. Chris and Gail are white, native English speakers from the United States who have learned other languages, and Anuj is Indian and multilingual, growing up with English, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi.

We begin by describing Anuj's development of this particular case study. We follow this with the module itself and then guiding responses from the two WPAs' responses that we developed independently but that revealed significant overlap in their guiding principles. We conclude with a rationale for implementing similar experiential resources in WPA training.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCENARIO

Although a number of scholarly works connect writing program administration work to SLW principles and research, the use of case studies for this kind of professional development may not be common. Such scenarios might have given Anuj a foundation for curricular decision-making in the multilingual Indian context where he had been a WPA, and so he desired more practical writing program administration resources. When he later took Chris's Second Language Writing doctoral course, the readings made him realize that even United States-based WPAs face similar struggles (Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, & Lamm, 2006; Matsuda, 2012). In 2006, Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, and Lamm had edited a special issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* to address this need, noting that a major challenge was that few courses in second language writing existed in rhetoric and composition programs (p. 12). In a later article, Matsuda (2012) shared an archetypal WPA experience to shed light on how even such courses do not necessarily

help in communicating directly with faculty outside their programs looking for advice on whether to fail a multilingual student or not based on their lack of standard English grammar skills. Many WPAs with some SLW expertise try to share various research studies they have read, but the faculty in question have no time to engage with this literature (2012, p. 142). This description of the situation led Anuj to see that this common means of training WPAs in SLW—reading research articles—may be insufficient for building crucial skills like stakeholder management and the strategic communication required to tackle problems they faced in their administrative roles.

While serving as a WPA, Anuj learned how impactful an experiential workshop could be when he attended one conducted by Aniha Brar at Ashoka University (Brar, 2018), in which participants were given hypothetical crisis situations that professionals in their field might face. Each group had to study their crisis situation and craft an appropriate communication strategy. Later, when given the opportunity to develop a project for Chris's SLW course, Anuj proposed creating a similar case study that could support WPAs in developing critical communication skills. He decided to focus on a topic that had troubled him as a teacher and a WPA in India: Should multilingual students be encouraged to learn standard English grammar, or should they be supported to feel confident about their own ways of using English (Gupta, 2019)?

Anuj invited Chris and Gail to write responses as though each of them was the WPA in an institution where this hypothetical conflict arose. These sample responses from SLW professionals would be the jumping-off point for discussions during a case study-based workshop. After the invitation to craft their responses, Chris and Gail shared with Anuj how little practice they had had as graduate students addressing various scenarios they have had to engage with as professionals, without the immediate consequences of having to address them “live.” This article compiles the case study and responses, aiming to offer a practical resource for graduate students and WPAs who may not have access to formal training or mentorship to develop experiential, embodied knowledge in a low-risk environment. We hope that the collaborative nature of Anuj's original workshop design will underscore the value of discussing previous scholarship and of collaboratively responding to a case study. After Chris and Gail discussed the similarities in their responses, it became clear to all of us that we would likely consult with others at our institutions about how to address such a scenario should it arise at our own institutions. People have valuable vantage points, expertise, and insights, and we do not lose access to those when we receive our degrees.

THE CASE STUDY MODULE

Below, we represent the case study module in a format that can be shared with students or professionals in a workshop on language diversity in writing program administration work. Therefore, the second-person referents throughout the next section are the students and WPAs participating in this proposed workshop.

Grammar Crisis at the University: What Can the WPA Do?

Learning Objectives

- Building familiarity with language policy and approaches to grammar in second language writing
- Learning how to develop a stance using that knowledge to tackle real-life situations in the workplace
- Learning how to communicate with stakeholders in high stakes conflict situations.

Background and Suggested Readings

If you are new to the teaching of writing and/or to writing program administration work, it might seem absurd to question whether or not students should be taught how to use grammar correctly in a writing course. It seems commonsensical to include grammar in a course that seeks to develop students' writing skills, right? But common sense is often a lot more complicated under the surface. Assumptions about the naturalness of grammar teaching have been at the heart of much debate in the field of writing studies, notably resulting in the resolution, "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974), and in the emergence of various subfields like second language writing and translanguaging in the United States. While several in-depth literature reviews chronicle these debates (see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Matsuda, 2020; Tardy, 2011), table 1 offers a list of suggested readings to introduce the most prominent points of debate.

Table 1
Suggested Readings for Discussion

Can grammar be taught?	Should grammar be taught?	Which grammar should be taught?	What can/should WPAs do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Truscott (1996) • Ferris and Hedgcock (2013) chapter 8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCC (1974) • CCCC (2020) • Ferris and Hedgcock (2013) chapter 9 • Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, and Lamm (2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canagarajah (2006) • Matsuda and Matsuda (2010) • Young (2010) • Atkinson and Tardy (2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matsuda (2012) • Tardy (2011) • Miller-Cochran (2010) • Shuck (2006)

Key Areas for Reflection

What follows is a hypothetical situation where WPAs apply knowledge from the readings in table 1 and from their own intuition to respond to the challenge. While reading this case, consider the following guiding questions:

- Who are the main stakeholders? What are their relationships and what does this tell us about the institutional ecosystem?
- What kinds of communication processes exist among these stakeholders?
- What are the root causes of the conflict?
- What kinds of roles, responsibilities, and challenges does the WPA have?
- What powers and constraints do they have?
- What skills should WPAs develop to tackle such situations?
- Is it possible to develop certain guiding principles that WPAs can use while making decisions in such conflict situations? What would these look like?

The Scenario

You are the director of a writing program at a university in the United States and have just received a petition that grabs your attention, titled “Demand for Abolishing Grammar Racism on Campus,” and signed by over 100 students. The petition argues that teachers shouldn’t cut marks for grammar mistakes in their exams and assignments. Penalizing students for their grammar, the petition states, oppresses multilingual students who come from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds and unfairly privileges urban, predominantly white, standard English-educated students. For this reason, the petition demands, teachers

should develop more socially just grading and teaching practices, focusing on students' ideas rather than their grammar, instead of reinforcing pre-existing racial and linguistic hierarchies. The students end by saying that if their demands are not met, they will have no choice but to stage walkouts.

As you read the petition, two other emails arrive in your mailbox. These are from the Director of the Careers Office (DCO), who handles job placements, and from the Vice Provost (VP). The former expresses grave concerns about the grammar petition doing the rounds on campus, and the latter demands that you get rid of this matter quickly before this reaches social media and impacts future student enrollments. Both of these administrators feel that allowing students to ignore grammar will be extremely harmful. The DCO states that the global economy and academia today are dominated by standard English. All job recruiters want this basic skill from candidates of a prestigious U.S. university that ranks among the topmost institutions in the world. "If students send in their CVs and Statements of Purpose in broken English, who will give them jobs and scholarships?" writes the DCO. The VP adds that parents want their children to learn to write good, professional prose in English. "What is the point of paying so much in tuition dollars if their children come out of college writing exactly like they used to before they came in?" asks the VP.

The Challenge

As the director of the Writing Program, you must develop a strategic response on how best to tackle the growing situation by addressing the needs of all stakeholders. Draft an email to the students, cc-ing the DCO and VP, that addresses the various concerns that have come to your table and articulates your strategy to respond.

Writing Guidelines for Students

- Work in groups of three.
- Before developing your response, read through at least five sources in the "Suggested Readings" list.
- Analyze the case. Who are the primary stakeholders? What are their needs? What are the points of conflict and potential synergies? What other stakeholders on campus can you count on in your strategic response?
- What is your position? How will you convince your audience?

- Draft an email to the petitioning students, cc-ing the Vice Provost and the Director of the Careers Office. Minimum word limit for your email is 600 words.

Guiding Responses

Response 1: Christine Tardy (University of Arizona)

Dear students,

I want to thank you for voicing your perspective regarding the role of grammar in the teaching and assessment of writing at our university. Your concerns are important to the Writing Program and the university community, and I want you to know that they are taken seriously. As a teacher of writing, I am heartened to see you use the power of writing to express your views and to affect change.

Your petition argues that multilingual students are disadvantaged by grading practices that privilege grammatical accuracy in writing. Your views are supported by decades of scholarship in sociolinguistics, which demonstrates the rich diversity and variation of language. English has developed a multitude of varieties because of its wide reach around the world, impacted by colonialism, globalization, and technology. While U.S. English users “go to the hospital,” British English users “go to hospital”; and where an American might say “he has finished cooking,” a Nigerian might say “he has finish cooking.” These kinds of variations are often systematic—in other words, they follow a grammatical pattern that is used regularly within the variety. Systematized varieties of English (with unique features of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) exist in many countries where English is a dominant or official language: Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, the Philippines, Nigeria, South Africa, and Belize are some examples. As we prepare students to write in today’s globalized environments, it is important that we recognize that languages are inherently flexible and constantly evolving, and that grammatical variations exist. What might be considered an “error” in one context may be a “norm” in another.

It is important to acknowledge that grammar mistakes do occur. Not every unfamiliar grammar feature is a result of a world English variety; some are simply the result of a language learner

working to use a complex language system. Many multilingual students are developing this kind of linguistic knowledge while studying in English. It is a difficult process, and research in second language acquisition shows that accurate use of a grammatical system is slow, gradual, and often non-linear. It may take some time after we “learn” a grammatical form before we are able to systematically use it in context, whether in speaking or writing. Research also shows that we often make more grammatical mistakes when writing in new kinds of texts or with challenging content.

Because we know that English grammar is globally diverse and that grammatical mistakes are a normal part of language acquisition, it follows that multilingual learners (who often use global varieties of English or are still developing English grammar knowledge) should not be penalized for using grammar that doesn’t conform to a single standard of U.S. English. Penalizing students for practices that are simply a part of using and learning a globalized language would be unfair. As a result, the Writing Program is currently working to establish a program-wide policy that excludes the grading of grammatical accuracy from assessment criteria for students’ major papers. Such a policy will allow instructors to focus on aspects of writing that can reasonably be developed in the writing classroom and that can be fairly assessed across our student populations.

At the same time, the Writing Program understands that in some contexts the use of certain grammatical norms is important to the success of a text. For example, in a résumé, job application letter, or scholarship application, texts that use unfamiliar grammatical patterns or that display errors resulting from language learning may be judged more harshly. We also understand that many students want and deserve to learn the grammar forms that are privileged in a society, and our writing classrooms can support them in that process.

For this reason, we feel it is important that writing instruction include language instruction. Classroom activities can help students focus on grammatical choices that writers make in different contexts, for different readers, and in different kinds of texts. To improve the attention given to language within our writing

classrooms, we will be implementing program-wide support for teachers, including workshops and the creation of a resource bank that will focus on how to best support language development for all of our student writers. Our goal is to build students' language repertoires and their awareness of and strategies for how they can use language (including grammar) effectively as writers.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to me and to the university community. Your petition can provide a springboard for a campus-wide discussion about language and language diversity, including how our classes can support linguistically diverse students and also build awareness of language for all members of our community.

Kind regards,
Dr. Christine Tardy
Professor of English Applied Linguistics

Response 2: Gail Shuck (Boise State University)

Dear students,

I deeply appreciate you bringing your concerns about grading and grammar to my attention. I take them seriously, and I join in your desire for equity throughout our campus. Even though your petition referred to instructors across the curriculum, my role as Director of the Writing Program, with a background working with multilingual students, gives me a platform to speak on language-related equity. I definitely have a stake in this issue, so thank you for including me on this email.

The mission of the Writing Program includes giving writers of all language backgrounds the tools for deciding how to write for a variety of audiences and for developing ownership of their education. In writing this passionate, well-reasoned petition, you are revealing to me that you have taken ownership of your own educational paths.

I'd like to suggest first that any of you who signed the petition join me in a meeting this week. *I want to hear directly from you* about what prompted your decision to develop this petition,

what grammar issues you've been graded down for, and what experiences with writing and grammar grades you've had.

In order to develop policies around language, which is what you're asking for, we need to describe in detail what's happening on the ground. Prof. Christine Tardy, a specialist in second-language writing studies, has written about how critical it is that previous research and everyday language practices come together. Faculty have a wide range of approaches to grading, and probably an equally wide range of opinions about whether grammar should be graded. Finding out what those opinions are, in a systematic way, can give us a lot of guidance about what our options are for responding to this situation.

Once we talk in person, I'd like to form a Language and Writing Task Force, composed of students, faculty, and other campus leaders, including language specialists and anyone invested in this issue. A lot of research exists about whether correcting grammar improves writing, and even more about what "grammar" actually refers to. For example, research on English as a global language tells us that there are distinguishable varieties of English in many different countries, including India, Nigeria, Singapore, The Philippines, and others. Fun fact: Of the people around the world who use English regularly (not just studying it), most are not actually monolingual, native English speakers. So, the way we all use English is going to be different, even when we write for academic or professional publications. Of course, as your petition pointed out, there are also different grammar structures in different language communities in the United States. Language is, after all, a way of signaling our identities and membership in multiple communities.

I propose that this Task Force

1. gather some data about language diversity on our campus;
2. find out more about how faculty assign grades, and for what kinds of writing tasks;
3. read some of the research on language and writing, including position statements from major professional organizations;
4. discuss the implications of that research; and

5. develop a set of recommendations for the campus, maybe even developing a series of workshops for faculty on such topics as different methods for grading, forms of communication in different disciplines, and faculty responses to student writing.

Together, we should come up with priorities, not limited to the above list. I am committed to working on solutions, but I need your voices and your help. I would like to see members of this proposed Language and Writing Task Force be compensated for this work (e.g., internship credit, stipends for participating, or reassignment of employee workload), so I will follow up on those possibilities. Our Center for Teaching and Learning, which has workshops for faculty in a Writing and Learning series and a focus on inclusive teaching, would be likely to support us, too. I've participated in workshops on inclusive teaching and have learned a lot, including about a type of grading that's based on the amount of labor students do.

As you can tell, this is a longer-term set of responses than you might have imagined. It might help members of our campus community feel more invested in this dialogue, though. The more we can invite the faculty and other campus leaders to participate, the more likely they are to reflect on their beliefs and practices and to try new approaches.

Keep in mind that we (faculty, staff, and administrators) want you to be successful, community-minded, independent thinkers and communicators. That means constantly challenging yourself to learn different ways to communicate to different audiences. That includes not just the vocabulary specific to your fields of study but also grammar structures that help you to communicate your knowledge to others. One question we can explore together is how we can include discussions of grammar in classes throughout the curriculum. My own approach is one of "additive" grammar instruction, teaching phrases and sentence structures that give students more tools in their linguistic toolbox.

Let me thank you again for your commitment to inclusion and for your specific, thoughtful requests. I could not let the petition

go without a concrete, detailed response, and so I hope that we can come up with a time to meet this week.

I very much look forward to a dialogue with you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gail Shuck

Professor of Linguistics

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE ABOVE CASE STUDY WORKSHOP

While developing case studies, it is important to adapt them to the lived realities of particular student populations. To do this, instructors are encouraged to customize the case details to their local settings, with care to avoid exclusion of some participants in the workshop, to enable greater student engagement. We also recommend the following practices:

- After the module has been distributed, students can first write memos individually to help develop their positions.
- Once everyone has some basic responses, they can discuss their respective ideas and develop a collective response.
- Then all the groups can engage in a collective discussion with the instructor, with each group presenting their strategic responses. The groups might act out or role play their strategy to make their approach more engaging. The instructor and other groups can then engage in constructive questioning to help each group expand its approach to the case.
- As each group presents, instructors could annotate or develop mind maps that emerge from students to help develop a bird's eye view of all the ideas.
- Active and inclusive listening should be encouraged during this entire process.
- Once all the groups have presented, the instructors should then distribute the guiding responses section of the case study (see above) and ask everyone to read and discuss them, to consider similarities and differences between those and their own approaches, and to think about ways they might want to revise their strategies after reading the sample responses (if at all).

- Once the exercise is complete, students can browse through some of the following articles as a homework exercise: UWT Teaching and Learning Center (2016), Ciccotta (2017), and McCarty (2017). These texts will take them through the controversial events that happened at the University of Washington, Tacoma in 2017, where a similar issue as represented in the case study had occurred.

A COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

As we developed our respective responses to this scenario, the three of us found ourselves turning to our knowledge gained from our positions as advocates for multilingual writers, from SLW scholarship, and from discussions we've had with others. The importance of seeing multiple responses and perspectives became very clear to us as we compared our responses. None of us have dealt with exactly this scenario, but all of us drew on our knowledge of linguistic change and variation, on the need for data-gathering to effect institutional change, and on our experiences developing relationships with other academics and campus partners, including students. We are also familiar with dominant ideologies of language that privilege certain users of English at the top of a hierarchy of language users and "good writers." We are knowledgeable about the variety of language practices that global English users engage in, as well as the need to reconsider how grading practices often reproduce social hierarchies tied to colonization and complex connections between language and power. Reading each other's responses and discussing them highlighted for us the continued professional growth that we engage in, whether we are current doctoral students or seasoned scholars and administrators.

We hope that this case study module, as well as new modules that readers will create for their own campuses, will be valuable for those in administrative roles or even for instructors hoping to collaborate with other faculty on issues of equity. Each of us has felt at some level that we stumbled our way through administrative challenges early on, and we sought the counsel of more experienced mentors, within or outside our respective campuses. Participating in this or similar case study modules as respondents, particularly in a group setting, would give others a low-risk opportunity to draw on each other's knowledge and strengths to develop as professionals. We hope to see an increase in such experiential resources that can help future WPAs feel better prepared for the world that awaits them. Finally, we hope it is clear that the collaborative nature of the case study module explicitly encourages participants to know—or remind themselves—that writing

program administration work is fundamentally a process of ongoing learning and collaboration.

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