# Online Adult Student Perceptions on Racial and Linguistic Identity and Academic Writing

Welcome to my presentation about “Online Adult Student Perceptions on Racial and Linguistic Identity and Academic Writing” for the Online Writing Centers Association’s (OWCA) 2021 virtual conference.

## Welcome

My name is Julie Johnson Archer. My pronouns are she, her, and hers, and I acknowledge that as a White woman and daughter of a family full of educators, I’ve been privileged in my academic writing journey. I am the Director of the Online Writing Center for Abilene Christian University’s online campus. If you’d like to follow along with me through this presentation, I’ve provided a full transcript and presentation slides to the OWCA.

## Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

As I record this, I reside in what is now called Tarrant County, Texas, a land that was forcibly taken from Native Americans. I want to take this moment to appreciate the water and the soil that continue to bring life to this region. I live and work on land that has been inhabited by Jumano, Wichita, Tawakoni, Nʉmʉnʉʉ Sookobitʉ (Comanche), and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) people. You can learn more about the land you are on by visiting the [Native Land Digital Map](https://native-land.ca/). Even further than this land acknowledgement, I want to follow Dr. Vay’s example and also take this chance to commit to the flourishing of not only the land but also the bodies, labor, and lives of people of color in my community. Specifically, my commitment is to combat racial injustice in literacy in higher education and writing centers. May we all commit to justice for the earth around us and its inhabitants, no matter where you are listening from.

## Overview

Throughout this presentation, I will walk through the components of my research study, from how and why I created it, to its findings and applications. You’ll find a full list of my sources at the end of the slides.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine and contribute to the topics of translingualism and antiracism in the context of online writing centers (OWCs) serving primarily graduate and professional students, and in the context of student perspectives.

Conversations about translingualism and antiracist tutoring and teaching have often reflected perspectives of researchers and teachers, not students. Even further from center in the literature are the perspectives of online adult students in graduate and professional degree programs. I’m responding to Gevers’s (2018) and Kafle’s (2020) calls for more research on student perspectives of academic writing standards, and following the lead of the 4Cs’ (Conference on College Composition and Communication’s) demand to recognize “the interconnection between language, race, and identity” (Baker-Bell et al., 2020).

As the leader of an OWC, I wanted to do this research to listen to what students believe and want when it comes to their writing needs so I can craft resources to meet them where they are, rather than just giving them what I think they need.

## Theoretical Framework

I based my research on two key theories: translingualism and antiracism. I don’t claim to be an antiracist scholar, but I am learning from those who are. Vershawn Young (2020), also known as Dr. Vay, sums up translingualism, saying: “Language must always be seen as a resource and never as a barrier” (p. 17). Contrary to the idea that one standard of English is the only right way to write in academic spaces, translingualism views all languages and dialects a writer brings to their writing as valuable resources.

Translingualism also involves the concept that language is an essential part of identity (Green, 2016). This is important to consider because some students may not differentiate between criticism of their writing and criticism of their identity. Feedback that is perceived as criticism of part of one’s identity can lead to feelings of shame and exclusion, which has implications for who feels like they belong in higher education.

Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) work *How to Be an Antiracist* formed the basis for my definition of antiracism: “An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group” (p. 20). This concept relates to how different racial and cultural groups’ uses of language are viewed in academia, especially Black English, which is still often excluded, even violently, in classrooms and assignments.

## Research Questions

My project began with these research questions. I defined “academic writing” as any writing task that students do for their coursework.

1. The first question focused on students’ perceptions of the relationship between their **racial identity** and academic writing standards.
2. Next, the relationship between their **language(s) or dialect(s)** and academic writing.
   1. As part of this, I wondered how students perceive **mixing languages** or dialects in academic writing.

## Methods

In order to explore these questions, I obtained IRB approval, and used convenience sampling to invite all students at one university to an anonymous online survey. At the end, I invited those who were interested to a follow-up online interview.

## Participants’ Gender and Age

I must acknowledge the limitation that this sample is not generalizable even to this study site. But, 60 participants completed the survey. Ten of those participated in follow-up interviews. The majority of these participants were doctoral and graduate students and identified as female, and the average age was 43 years old. For a detailed breakdown of participants’ gender and age, refer to the table on this slide.

| **Demographic** | ***n*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Gender (fill in blank) |  |  |
| Female | 53 | 88.3 |
| Male | 7 | 11.7 |
| Age |  |  |
| 21–29 | 11 | 18.3 |
| 30–39 | 14 | 23.3 |
| 40–49 | 17 | 28.3 |
| 50–59 | 12 | 20 |
| 60–69 | 5 | 8.3 |
| prefer not to answer | 1 | 1.7 |

## Participants’ Ethnicity and Languages

For a detailed breakdown of the participants’ ethnicities and languages, refer to the two tables on this slide. Briefly, the largest groups were the 17% who identified as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; 28% as Black or African American, and 58% as White. Collectively, the participants speak a total of 14 languages and can write in a total of nine languages. The top languages that participants write in included English, Spanish, and French.

| **Ethnicity** | ***n*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin | 10 | 16.7 |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 4 | 6.7 |
| Asian | 3 | 5 |
| Black or African American | 17 | 28.3 |
| White | 35 | 58.3 |
| Multiracial or biracial | 5 | 8.3 |
| Other (fill in blank) |  |  |
| Brown | 1 | 1.7 |
| Hispanic | 1 | 1.7 |

*Note*. *N* = 60. Participants selected all that applied, so the total percentage is over 100%.

| **Language (Written)** | ***n*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| English | 60 | 100 |
| Spanish | 14 | 23.3 |
| French | 2 | 3.3 |
| Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese) | 1 | 1.7 |
| German | 1 | 1.7 |
| Haitian Creole | 1 | 1.7 |
| Italian | 1 | 1.7 |
| Korean | 1 | 1.7 |
| Portuguese | 1 | 1.7 |

## Participants’ Dialects

Participants listed over 20 dialects they speak; the most common were Southern English, Black English/African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Northeastern English, and Spanglish/Borderslang. For a full list, see the table on this slide.

| **Dialect** | ***n*** |
| --- | --- |
| Southern English | 14 |
| Black English/AAVE | 12 |
| East Coast (New England) English | 6 |
| Spanglish/Borderslang | 6 |
| Midwestern English | 3 |
| Appalachian | 2 |
| Valley-girl/Californian English | 2 |
| Cajun English | 1 |
| Castilian Spanish | 1 |
| Central Mexican Spanish | 1 |
| Chicano | 1 |
| Colombian Spanish | 1 |
| Ecuadorian Spanish | 1 |
| Fante | 1 |
| Japanolésa | 1 |
| Latinx | 1 |
| Northern Mexican Spanish | 1 |
| Pakistani/Indian | 1 |
| Puerto Rican Jibaro/African/Taino | 1 |
| Quechua | 1 |
| Simplistic for individuals with intellectual disabilities | 1 |
| Southern German | 1 |
| Twi | 1 |

aJapanese-English-Spanish

## Findings

I’ve broken my findings into sections based on my research questions: first, race; next, language; then, language mixing. In order to keep it brief, I’ve included only a few of the survey questions and answers and summarized the findings that best answered my questions and were most interesting to me, but I will be glad to share more of the findings with you by request.

## Racial Identity and Academic Writing

When asked how participants felt their race or ethnicity impacts their academic writing ability, if at all, their responses were almost evenly split into those who see an impact and those who don’t. I grouped responses into more specific categories that emerged: over half said there was no impact or the impact was neutral; 23% said there was a positive impact; 16% said there was a negative impact; and 5% said there are both positive and negative impacts. Of those who responded that there is no impact, or the impact is neutral, five mentioned the impact of their parents or educational background instead (for example, one wrote, “Given I am at least the 3rd generation with a college degree, writing ability was a priority in our family along with reading skills”).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Response** | ***n*** | ***%*** |
| No or neutral impact | 32 | 53.3 |
| Positive impact | 14 | 23.3 |
| Negative impact | 10 | 16.7 |
| Both positive and negative impact | 3 | 5 |

## The Impacts of Race or Ethnicity

Responses that the impact of race or ethnicity is positive included statements like, “I can give a different perspective.” Four participants acknowledged that their proximity to “proper English” or “White privilege” has given them an “advantage.” Responses that the impact was negative ranged from experiencing difficulty translating or code-switching and a fear of being stereotyped or misunderstood. For example, one said, the “assumption may be AA [African Americans] write at a lower level than Caucasians or Asians;” one Hispanic participant who speaks and writes in five languages said, “It worries me that others will not understand my academic writing.”

## The Negative Impact of Race or Ethnicity

The negative impact of racial identity on academic writing was further demonstrated by an interviewee who identifies as an African American woman, who said: “Writing and my identity can cross wires when someone realizes that I am African American. When they interact via email, and phone calls, most believe that I am Caucasian.” When I asked how this makes her feel, she said, “At one time . . . frustration. . . . these individuals assumed that Caucasians were the only ones that could present information in a manner that was understandable and succinct.”

## Racial Identity – Highlighted Findings

While over a quarter of respondents listed their race or ethnicity when asked what identities they’re mindful of while writing for courses, many participants answered “neutral” to the various survey questions. I was interested to discover through the interviews, that answering “neutral” can have a variety of meanings. When asked first whether their racial identity is accurately represented in their academic writing, and next, if that is important to them, I asked two interviewees to elaborate on why they answered “neutral” to both of these questions. One, who identifies as White and male said, “I answered neutral because I do not try to represent my race or ethnicity in academic writing. . . . It is not even a thought that enters my mind.” In contrast, another who identifies as Black and female said, “I chose neutral because I don’t want to be identified as a black woman in my academic writing unless it relates to the topic. I chose to remain as neutral as possible when writing to avoid racial bias by readers or professors. Unfortunately, this has happened in the past.”

## Linguistic Identity and Academic Writing

I asked two questions about whether participants feel their languages/dialects help or hinder their academic writing. Responses here were pretty mixed: 30% said their languages and dialects help them, and 25% said they didn’t help, while 45% answered *neutral*. Then, over half said their languages and dialects do not hinder them, while only 11% said they do hinder them.

My languages/dialects ***help*** me when I write for my courses:

| **Response** | ***n*** | ***%*** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 7 | 11.7 |
| Agree | 11 | 18.3 |
| Neutral | 27 | 45 |
| Disagree | 12 | 20 |
| Strongly disagree | 3 | 5 |

My languages/dialects ***hinder*** me when I write for my courses:

| **Response** | ***n*** | ***%*** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 1 | 1.7 |
| Agree | 6 | 10 |
| Neutral | 19 | 31.7 |
| Disagree | 17 | 28.3 |
| Strongly disagree | 17 | 28.3 |

## Languages and Dialects

Of those who said their languages helped them, six explained that their proximity to Whiteness or to Standard American English (SAE) is what helps them (e.g., one said, “my dialect is probably how most people view American English”). Other responses said their languages and dialects help them have a “larger pool of words and ideas,” have a wider perspective, and “tailor” their writing to certain audiences. An interviewee who speaks Black English said, “My language is a part of who I am and as such I want to express that in my writing. My audience needs to understand … my perspective.”

Of those who said their languages and dialects hinder their academic writing, four responses mentioned difficulty with “academic” audience expectations. For example, one participant said, “There is a reason why Grammarly works well. It is designed to make our writing sound systemic instead of creative, unique, or personal. . . . The more I sound like an old white male in any mainstream book the better my grade will be because this is considered formal academic writing. Formal writing is not minority inclusive, unless you are focusing on cultural specific subjects.” Other responses of how languages and dialects hinder their writing included difficulty with academic terminology, vocabulary, and grammar.

## Language Mixing and Academic Writing

I chose to use the term “language mixing,” as Kafle (2020) did, for clarity of meaning, instead of using terms that might be less immediately clear, like code meshing (Young, 2010) or code-switching.

I asked how participants would feel about mixing their languages or dialects in academic writing if their instructor were open to mixing. Responses were mixed with about 30% saying they were in favor of or interested in language mixing and about 37% saying they were against the idea.

| **Response** | ***n*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| In favor of or interested | 15 | 29.4 |
| Unsure or indifferent | 7 | 13.7 |
| Against | 19 | 37.3 |
| Both for and against | 6 | 11.8 |

## Against Language Mixing

71% said they do not mix their languages/dialects in their academic writing. There were many reasons for this. Responses ranged from valuing clarity, meeting academic expectations, and the idea that using one standard of language allows for communication to diverse audiences rather than to a select audience who understand a specific dialect or language.

## Example Quotations – Language Mixing

Here are some examples. One said, “I do not think academic writing should be mixed with my dialet [*sic*]. I want to learn how to write as scholar.” Another said, “I have to be the whitest version of myself at work and in school.” Another said, “I work very diligently to take my ‘voice’ out of academic writing.”

One interviewee who identifies as White, male, and learned Spanish as an adult, doesn’t believe dialects should be mixed in academic writing, but acknowledged that if standards like APA “are found to have structural bias, or need to allow for more expression, then we should open a dialog about how to change those standards, but there still need to be standards.”

## Language Mixing and Audience Awareness

One multilingual, Latina interviewee mentioned that due to her educational background and training in teaching foreign languages, her perspective on language is “more prescriptive.” She said that when reading academic research that mixes English and Spanish, “it doesn’t sit well with me. . . . As an educator, . . . I wonder if a less knowledgeable audience would be able to even understand . . . if they’re having to go back and forth between the two languages.”

One Black, female interviewee said, “You write for the intended audience. . . . No matter what the dialect is – VBE [Vernacular Black English], TexMex, Cajun, or Gullah – if the writing is intended for readers who don’t typically speak nor understand those dialects, I consider it a waste of valuable time . . . because too much can get lost in translation.”

## Interest in Language Mixing

Of the 29% who were in favor of or interested in language mixing, the common themes in their reasoning were that it would be more inclusive, engaging, and authentic. One participant said, “I would cry tears of joy. Imagine a world where people value more than one or two languages.” Another said depending on the assignment, “I might find writing as I speak … more real;” another said, “I would like to [hear] more of my peers ‘voices.’”

23% of participants said that they do mix their languages and dialects in their academic writing, but no one said *yes* very enthusiastically. Like one participant who said they probably do, “but it is not on purpose.”

Discussion

Here are a few conclusions. Going into the project, my hypothesis was that most of these students would not see a connection to or problem with academic writing as it pertains to their race and languages. That sentiment is certainly strong in the data, but my first takeaway is that many students do think their race is connected to their academic writing, for better or worse, and their languages and dialects are important to their academic writing.

It was interesting that some participants said they had not considered the relationship between all of these things. One interviewee thanked me for the chance to participate because it helped them stop and evaluate what they really think. This makes me wonder about how the writing center might be a place to challenge and grow students’ self-awareness, helping them see where and to what extent they appropriate academic English standards, or when they might choose to subvert them or code mesh instead. My takeaway here is not new, but if our goal is to be a resource for students in the writing process, engaging with their self-discovery, evolving identities, and agency in their academic writing is an important focus.

This project’s findings suggest that some students are uninterested and even resistant to the idea of making their writing more representative of their racial or linguistic identities through language mixing, which is in line with Kafle’s (2020) findings. However, my position is that we must center the voices of those who feel misrepresented or devalued in our institutions.

The data also suggest that the standards for academic writing in place are both valued and injurious. The standards are valued as a tool for educational and career opportunities, but they can and do have negative consequences in students’ lives—from having to hide their racial or dialectical identities and “write White,” as Inoue (2019) acknowledged, to the extra time and effort it takes to write in an unfamiliar language (p. 361). Many students also acknowledge their advantage over others who do not have the same opportunities, upbringing, or simply proximity to SAE.

Another overall theme that emerged was the idea that race, ethnicity, languages, and dialects positively impact *creative* writing endeavors, as opposed to academic writing. This split between the academic and personal or creative is strong in participants’ responses.

## Application 1

I want to leave you with some possible applications that I’ve taken from this research. While some participants might not feel the need or desire to make their academic writing more “authentic” or representative of their identities, Baker-Bell et al. (2020) remind us that “it is destructive and injurious to ignore” those connections as educators. So, for those who give feedback on writing in academic settings, one recommendation from this data is to *be specific*. General feedback that one’s writing is “unclear” can be interpreted as a “slight to [one’s] ethnicity” as one participant said. They went on to say, “Professors should be mindful of the racial insensitivity that accompanies feedback focused on ‘clarity’ to multilingual, racially diverse students.” This is not just about being kind, it is about being culturally responsive, engaging students’ writing knowing that their language is tied to their identity. For example, instead of simply writing “unclear” or “awkward” in the margins or at the bottom of the paper, write something specific, highlighting the exact word or phrase that you didn’t follow, and write “I got stuck on this word. Do you mean *this* or *that* instead?” This isn’t an exact science, but keeping this in mind will strengthen writing feedback.

## Application 2

Application number 2 is perhaps geared more towards professors, but writing centers should also consider this. Academic writing expectations should be transparent and explicit. This is challenging because so much of what is considered “good academic writing” is subjective or implicit. The data from this research reveal an interest in maintaining or even improving clear expectations of academic writing. So, an example of this is the language used in prompts. Instead of a vague statement that the writing should be flawlessly edited, consider stating up front that this “essay should be edited in line with Standard English and the grammar rules of any other languages or dialects used.” Or, perhaps giving a clear instruction for who the audience for a given assignment is: rather than just “an academic audience” which is vague and may be misused to mean a predominantly White audience, tell them to write in a way their grandparent would understand or how they would write to their peers at work. These are simple suggestions, and there are many more resources out there for professors who are designing assignments and assessments. I recommend Asou Inoue’s book, [*Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*](https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/inoue/).

## Application 3

Application number 3. Knowing the most common languages and dialects students at your institution use is useful information for writing centers’ hiring strategies and contextual resource development. We would do well to follow Green’s (2016) practice of learning about the language backgrounds of the students in front of us. One thing we’ve done in my center to do this is add a place on our registration form where students can offer more information about their linguistic identity: the languages and dialects they most identify with. Then, we will examine whether the resources offered match the diverse needs of our students. In my center, we will pursue hiring bilingual tutors in Black English and in Spanish and English, to better meet students’ where they are.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the continuing conversation about what is considered “academic” writing should not be about tearing down a standard or replacing it with a new one. Instead, as Dr. Vay (2020) stated, writing educators should focus on widening the available tools and resources for academic writing, specifically in a way that does not center White speech and writing habits, which are by no means the primary norms or expectations of the world or the multilingual U.S.

Online nontraditional students bravely bring many aspects of their identities to their academic writing and to the online writing center. The diversity of their experiences and beliefs about academic writing in relation to their racial and linguistic identities deserves further attention and consideration not only in the OWC, but from the program directors, deans, and admissions teams, especially at predominately White institutions (PWIs). This data was and continues to be rich with possibilities for application in my context, and I hope there has been a helpful takeaway for you, too.

## References

This last slide is a list of the references used in this presentation.

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## Thank You

Thank you for your time today.