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Exploring Grammar in Food Reviews: A Critical Language Awareness Approach

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Overview

This activity uses food reviews as an entry point for teaching grammatical awareness, specifically adjective strings and intensifiers, within a multilingual undergraduate writing course. Grounded in critical language awareness, the activity positions grammar as a rhetorical resource rather than a set of prescriptive rules. Students explore how writers use grammatical choices to craft tone, articulate perspective, and orient their message to specific audiences.

The assignment is informed by scholarship on linguistic justice, which challenges the assumption that so-called “standard” academic English is neutral or inherently superior (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015). Rather than treating multilingual language practices as deficits, linguistic justice frameworks call educators to interrogate how language hierarchies are socially constructed and tied to race, class, and power. From this perspective, grammar instruction becomes an opportunity not only to analyze form, but also to examine how particular grammatical features are often granted legitimacy while others are not.

Drawing on translanguageing theory (García & Wei, 2014), this activity invites students to see their full linguistic repertoires as meaningful resources for communication. Multilingual writers

often navigate multiple linguistic systems and discourse communities, strategically shifting registers, styles, and features in response to context. By analyzing contrasting food reviews, students examine how adjective strings, intensifiers, and multimodal elements such as emojis function rhetorically. They then interrogate how judgments about “professional” or “academic” grammar are shaped by broader social norms rather than by inherent linguistic value.

Time Commitment

60 minutes

Materials

One example of a formal critic-style food or restaurant review, such as from *The New Yorker* or the *New York Times*.

One example of an informal food or restaurant review, such as from Instagram or other social media platform.

Assignment or Activity Process

- In the first part of the activity, students examine two contrasting food reviews: a formal, critic-style review and an informal review, such as an Instagram post. Have students work in pairs. Ask students to read both reviews without annotating to gain a general sense of the content, tone, and audience of each review.
- Next, invite students to re-read each food review, with a specific focus on grammar and language choice. Ask students to work with their partner to identify and highlight the use of adjective strings and intensifiers in each text. Depending on the reviews selected, intensifiers may include words

(extremely, very, so); stylistic features (bold words, capitalization, punctuation), and multimodal elements such as emojis. Have students select three examples of intensifiers from each text.

- Create a class list of the intensifiers that partners identified in the text. Divide the list into two columns - one column for the formal or traditional review, and the other column for the informal review.
- In the second part of the activity, students interpret grammatical choices through a critical language awareness lens. After students have identified the intensifiers from each text, shift the focus from noticing grammatical patterns to interpreting their social and rhetorical meanings by asking partners to discuss the following questions:
 - What kinds of grammatical choices appear more frequently in the formal review compared to the informal review?
 - What assumptions do these grammatical patterns make about the reader?
 - Which grammatical choices might be described as “professional”, or “academic”? Who tends to make those judgements, and based on what norms?
 - How are those norms connected to broader social or cultural expectations about credibility, expertise, or authority?
- Next, lead a class discussion that begins by partners sharing out a synthesis and big ideas from their discussion. Extend the discussion by inviting students to interrogate the idea that certain grammatical choices are inherently more

“appropriate” or “correct” than others. Prompt students to examine translanguaging practices in the informal review, if present. Encourage them to consider how ideas about professional or academic language are socially constructed rather than neutral. As part of this discussion, ask students “whose language practices are often seen as “professional”, and whose language practices are often seen as “informal,” and how this might mirror larger society.

- In the final part of the activity, students apply their analysis by writing two short reviews of the same dish: one for a formal audience and one for an informal audience. Organize students into small groups of 2 - 4 and invite them to choose the dish they will review. This dish should be something that everyone in the group is familiar with, such as a popular item in the school cafeteria, or a food that most people have experienced (a sandwich, for example).
- Before students begin drafting, ask them to briefly plan how their grammatical choices might differ across the two reviews. Encourage groups to consider adjective strings, intensifiers, tone, and any other grammatical resources they noticed during the earlier analysis.
- During drafting, remind students that the goal is not to mimic a single “correct” style, but to experiment with how grammatical choices shift based on audience and purpose. Groups may choose to incorporate translanguaging practices in the informal review as it aligns with the audience and rhetorical goal.
- Once drafting is complete, have groups compare their two reviews side by side. Ask students to underline or highlight practices where grammatical choices differ between the two texts.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Analyze grammatical features in food reviews, including adjective strings and intensifiers, to understand how language choices shape tone and description.
- Explain how grammatical choices signal audience, purpose, and social expectations, including ideas about what counts as “professional” or “academic” language.
- Produce short written texts for different audiences by making deliberate grammatical choices that align with rhetorical goals.
- Reflect on how multilingual and translanguaging practices function as meaningful rhetorical resources rather than deviations for “standard” language norms.

Learning Accommodations

- Provide a sample review with key adjective strings and intensifiers already highlighted and briefly explained to model the analysis process.
- Allow students to discuss ideas in their preferred language(s)
- Offer multimodal options for the writing task, as needed.

Works Cited

- Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2020.
- Flores, Nelson, and Jonathan Rosa. "Undoing Appropriateness:

Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2015, pp. 149-171.

García, Ofelia., and Wei, Li. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.