

The Diction of Globally Competent Students: Helping Learners Recognize and Revise Exclusionary Language

In this 20-minute session, Rourke and Wynstra presented a problem, their students' difficulty recognizing and revising problematic language, and detailed a study that they undertook to develop and test a pedagogical intervention.

Problem

The power of language—and the power one can wield when using it well or poorly—is intricately linked to global competency, which is one of the learning goals of the graduate course at Babson called Strategic Writing for Managers. However, both Rourke and Wynstra—experienced teachers who have taught the course more than 30 times between them over 10 years—observed that even students who excel on traditional measures of writing competence were not attentive to the ways in which their language was exclusionary in its privileging of hegemonic norms. How does one teach students to use language that does not privilege, exclude and discriminate, when language itself is the architectural element of a society that often privileges, excludes and discriminates? And how could Rourke and Wynstra know if any teaching intervention they may design is effective?

Study Design

Inspired by presentations at Lilly-Austin 2017 and other work in the area of SOTL, Rourke and Wynstra consulted a Research Psychologist, Jeffrey Nicholas of Bridgewater State University, for help in designing a study that would answer these questions.

The hypothesis was that the teaching intervention would make students better able to recognize and revise exclusionary language.

Pre-test and Post-test

The Pre-test and Post-test were identical and were administered at the start and at the completion of the entire course.

Using SurveyMonkey, students accessed 9 statements. Respondents were asked to answer either “This sentence is satisfactory” or “This sentence can be improved,” which was followed by a text box in which respondents were instructed to “complete the text box by writing an improved version of the sentence.”

All statements were grammatically correct and were as simple as possible, to prevent respondents from focusing on grammar or stylistic changes. See a sample pre-test sentence on the back of this handout.

Intervention

About halfway through the 8-week course, Rourke and Wynstra each devoted 90 minutes in class to the topic of “the diction of globally competent students.” Students did the following:

- Read “Language of Difference: Writing about Race, Ethnicity, Social Class, and Disability,” created by Hamilton College’s Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, available at <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/Lang.of%20Difference-Race,Class,Disability.pdf>.
- Worked in small groups, divided by type of exclusionary language, to discuss one compelling aspect of the article.
- Shared their groups’ findings and asked questions.
- Practiced recognizing and revising sentences culled from Rourke and Wynstra’s prior students’ work. See a sample practice sentence on the back of this handout.

Data collection

The researchers retrieved the data from SurveyMonkey, then blind reviewed all of the responses. Each rater, Rourke and Wynstra, rated every response using a rating scale with anchors that was designed with the intervention’s learning goals in mind. See a sample rating with anchors on the back of this handout.

Results

A related samples t-test indicated that post-course scores ($M=20.60$, $SD= 7.89$) were significantly higher than pre-test scores ($M=12.26$, $SD=2.73$), $t(20)=-3.85$, $p=.00009$, $d=0.84$.

Sample Practice Sentence for in-class intervention

“It is important for businessmen to have a strong foundation in the Liberal Arts.”

Sample pre- and post-test sentence with rating scale and anchors

Sentence: “Stockbrokers who wish to be successful must learn to dress appropriately: a suit and tie, and no facial hair.”

Rating scale and anchors:

5	Rate this answer	
Poor	1 ----- 2 -----3 -----4----- 5	Excellent
<p>Weakest Answer: This sentence is satisfactory.</p> <p>Middle Answers: Stockbrokers who wish to be successful must learn to dress appropriately: a suit and tie [or sub “no facial hair” for “a suit and tie”] (2); Stockbrokers who wish to be successful must learn to dress appropriately (3).</p> <p>Strongest Answers: Stockbrokers who wish to be successful should dress professionally.</p>		