Using Understanding by Design to Build a High School Linguistics Course

By Amy L. Plackowski

Hudson High School is located in a small blue-collar town in central Massachusetts that was once famous for its shoe factory. It's a public high school with an enrollment of about 800 students, and since 2014, I've taught a one-semester linguistics elective offered to grades 10-12. I had the idea for offering a specific linguistics course when I noticed how engaged students were when I introduced linguistics in two other courses I taught: Dystopian Literature and AP English Language and Composition. In both classes, I drew heavily on my linguistics background to prompt students to examine language, power, the media, and politics. I found that students were naturally excited by linguistic content; lessons on linguistic determinism, etymology, and prescriptivism engaged even the most reticent students. Because of the excitement for linguistics that I saw in students, I proposed a linguistics elective, which Hudson High School has offered in alternate years since.

The addition of a linguistics course at Hudson High was made possible by a schedule change that allowed more semester electives to be added to the course catalog; in the English department, we could now include electives beyond the typical creative writing and journalism offerings. Because of this change, and also because we had an administration supportive of innovative multidisciplinary courses that capitalized on teacher and student passions, the course was easily approved. Hudson High School's new linguistics course happened to coincide with an uptick in interest in high school linguistics on the part of both secondary and post-secondary teachers. Larson, Denham, and Lobeck (2019) note that "Going back to at least the mid-1960s with Project English (O'Neil 2007), a range of scholars and educators have explored the potentials of modern Linguistics in the K-12 curriculum . . .", but in recent years, a sustained effort has gained momentum in introducing linguistics to high school students, most notably in the effort to create an Advanced Placement Linguistics course.[i]

As I began teaching my course and deciding how to organize it, I determined that my primary goal for high school students was not necessarily to prepare future linguists or linguistics majors, but to

give students a taste of the various fields in linguistics, to give them a sense of how it can be applied in multiple disciplines and career tracks. In this way, the course mirrors the content of many introductory linguistics courses at the university level, but modified for high school students. More importantly, however, I saw linguistics as being essential to the two goals that drive my personal educational philosophy in any class I teach: I want my students to be critical and questioning consumers of what they see and hear, and I want them to build a capacity for empathy and compassion, an appreciation for diversity, and a sense of justice.

Due to my focus on these outcomes, I designed the course using the curriculum development framework known as *Understanding by Design* (UbD) (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). Sometimes known as "backwards design," UbD asks teachers to identify what they want students to know and be able to do by the end of the course, and then plan backwards to define assessments and learning tasks. Although UbD is most often associated with unit design, I found it helpful to apply it to whole-course planning to make sure I kept my eye on the big picture. UbD is also the approach the College Board now recommends for practitioners designing an Advanced Placement course (College Board 2019), so as the AP Linguistics initiative moves forward, it may be helpful for both secondary and post-secondary practitioners to consider models of this framework already in use.

Essential Questions

To begin, I identified what Wiggins and McTighe call the "essential questions," which guide inquiry and structure student learning. These were,

- What attitudes and beliefs do we have about language, individually and as a society? How do those attitudes develop, and how do they influence our worldview?

- What does a person know when they "know" a language, and how do they acquire that knowledge?

- What do linguists know for sure about language, and where do linguistic theories diverge?

- Are our ideas about language supported by evidence? How can we test those ideas scientifically?

These questions require that students not simply recite definitions, but that they genuinely engage with linguistic questions in ways that can be applied to their academic and personal lives.

Enduring Understandings

Wiggins and McTighe define enduring understandings as the broad, comprehensive concepts we want students to walk away with at the end of the course. Enduring understandings must be transferable and generalizable, abstract, open, and uncovered through investigation and inquiry (128-130). Often they address the essential questions, at least in part. Linguistics students finishing my course will understand that

- Knowing a language is a complex interplay among sounds, words, sentences, and contexts. We learn rules for language without realizing it and without ever being taught them.
- Societies privilege certain language varieties over others, and these are embedded in histories and structures of power and oppression.
- Language is always changing.
- There is no such thing as "correct" language use.
- We can test our ideas about language through observation and experimentation.

Transfer Goals

The goal of developing curriculum using UbD is for students to be able "to take what [they] know and use it creatively, flexibly, fluently, in different settings or problems, on [their] own" (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, 40). I emphasize that students who take linguistics will be able to apply linguistic concepts in fields ranging from marketing and business to education to public policy. The interdisciplinary nature of linguistics—its unique blend of sciences and the humanities—is often a selling point to school administrators as well as students and parents, largely due to the increased focus on STEM

in school curricula. But because college and career readiness is (hopefully) not the only goal of a secondary education, my other transfer goals involve addressing students' social-emotional growth as well as making them empathetic and thoughtful citizens of the world. Therefore, I want them to

- Evaluate claims about language being made in the media and by people around them

- Recognize linguistic prejudice

- Take pride in their own language, language variety, and idiolect and

- Approach language in general with an attitude of interest, acceptance, and curiosity.

Keeping in mind that these questions, understandings, and goals cross over into multiple learning tasks throughout the course, I've outlined below some of the learning experiences that comprise my class and how they tie in to the ideas presented in stage one.

Evidence of Student Understanding

The course as I teach it now mirrors the organization of most introductory linguistics courses and textbooks: an introduction to linguistic theory; phonology, morphology, and syntax; psycholinguistics (including acquisition); semantics; pragmatics; language change; sociolinguistics, with a focus on region, race, and gender; and language in the media and politics. As I began to conceptualize the benchmark assignments that would demarcate units of study, I moved on to the second stage of UbD: developing the formative and summative assessments that determine whether students demonstrate the knowledge and understandings laid out in the first stage (Wiggins and McTighe 2005).

For example, to assess students' understanding of language change, they create a timeline of the English language that details how it has changed and the various factors that influenced those changes. Questions and understandings related to language change and variation are intertwined with the transfer goal of being able to evaluate claims about language being made in the media and among peers. If students understand that language change is constant and inevitable, and that all languages and language varieties are equally complex, they can understand the problems with grammatical prescriptivism and

linguistic privilege. Knowing the history of English gives them a glimpse into the histories and structures of power and oppression that led to the privileging of certain language varieties. Strong evidence of understanding in the timeline includes students' explanation of how language has changed in its sounds, vocabulary, and grammar, but also identifies historical and social factors that led to those changes—colonization, scientific advancement, and gender roles, for example.
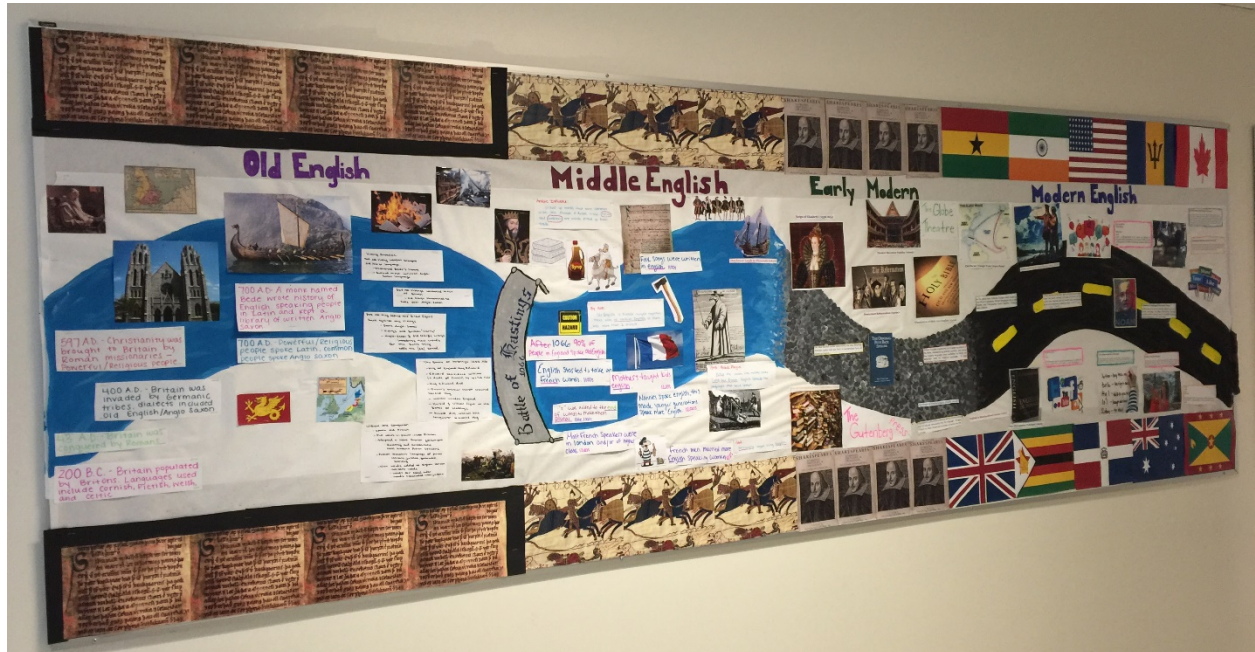
Near the end of the course, students design a linguistic experiment in a project that addresses the first transfer goal: evaluating claims about language. Students generally have an understanding of the scientific method from previous science classes, and have seen how linguists apply it to linguistic inquiry earlier in this course with examinations of famous experiments like the Wug test, but this project asks them to apply the scientific method to their own claims about language. In a small group, students design, implement, and present a small-scale experiment. For example, one group observed classrooms to see if high school students interrupt female teachers more than male teachers. Others surveyed former students in the English language learner program to see if they identified more strongly with the mainstream English-speaking population or the ELL population. While time constraints dictate that these experiments

must be small enough in scale for students to complete within a few weeks, the project requires students to show that they can apply content knowledge to research questions directed by their own interests.

The last assessment, a language autobiography, provides a vehicle for students to reflect on their own language and their attitudes about language. This essay addresses almost all of the essential questions, enduring understandings, and transfer goals, as students must synthesize their knowledge of sounds, words, and sentences; of language acquisition and language variation; of language use in their lives. Most importantly, it addresses the third transfer goal: to take pride in one's own language variety and idiolect. The parameters of the assignment are broad to allow students to write about a topic they are passionate about, but students are given prompts such as, "What are the most powerful influences on your use of language?", or "Tell about a time when you felt outside of the linguistic community," and instructed to connect their stories to concepts learned in class. Students who perform well on this task integrate linguistic ideas with their own autobiographies, demonstrating a knowledge of how those linguistic concepts are relevant to their lives outside of the classroom.

Learning Experiences

In the first few semesters I offered the course, instruction was mostly lecture-based. This was due to several factors: the fact that I had not taken a linguistics class in over a decade and was re-familiarizing myself with the material as I taught it, the lack of planning time allotted to elective courses, and the fact that resources for teaching high school-level linguistics were sparse to non-existent. With every semester I taught the course, I added more hands-on experiences, eventually making it a professional goal to add a new project-based or experiential element to every unit. The curriculum time devoted to this goal allowed me to focus on stage three of UbD: planning learning experiences that enable students to achieve the desired results.

Wiggins and McTighe emphasize that learning experiences should be "engaging and effective": active, varied, relevant to the real world, goal-oriented, and illustrated by models and exemplars (195-196). The acronym "WHERETO" enables instructors to deliberately weave characteristics of good design

into planning (197). Instructors must be clear about *where* instruction is headed and *why* (W); *hook* and *hold* students' attention (H); *equip* students with essential knowledge (E); provide opportunities to *rethink, reflect,* and *revise* (R); have students *evaluate* their progress (E); *tailor* instruction to student interests (T); and *organize* instruction for deep understanding (O) (197-198).

An example of how I applied WHERETO in lesson planning comes at the beginning of the course. Since most students enter the course with only a vague idea of what linguistics is, the first learning task, an "opinionaire," introduces students to some of the topics we cover in the course and also acts as a pre-assessment of student attitudes about language. The opinionaire is a series of statements about language where students rank the degree to which they agree, either as a Likert scale or a four-corners activity.[ii] Some statements I have used in the past include, "If a word isn't in the dictionary, it's not a real word," "The English language is deteriorating over time," and "Some languages and dialects are more complex than others." This activity is followed by an analysis of Weird Al Yankovic's parody "Word Crimes," in which the singer enumerates various pet peeves regarding grammar and usage. Students discuss the song with various prompting questions, such as "What beliefs does Weird Al have about language?" and "Have you heard these ideas elsewhere? Are there any you agree or disagree with?" (Plackowski 2019). Finally, students are taught the definitions of prescriptivism and descriptivism. Students are asked to identify where Weird Al falls on the descriptivist / prescriptivist spectrum, and to evaluate their own ideas about language in relation to these terms. This activity not only introduces students to some of the foundations of linguistic thought, but provides me with data that determines subsequent instruction.

These activities, taken together as one lesson, meet several elements of WHERETO. By organizing the statements in the opinionaire around the topics we will study in the course (for example, language use, language change, and language variation), students learn where we are headed in the course and why (W). Tapping into students' beliefs and experiences, as well as using elements of popular culture and humor, captures students' attention (H). It also tailors activities to student interests (T). The organization of these activities promote deep understanding and reflection (O) by asking students to

identify their own views, think more deeply about those views, and then be challenged to rethink them (R). Further, the work students do in this lesson provides a foundation for several of the assessments described above, as well as for the course as a whole (E1). They will revisit these ideas throughout the course, and especially when they write their language autobiography at the end of the semester (E2).

Uses

As of this writing, the future of linguistics at HHS is unfortunately in doubt. Despite demonstrated student interest, a new administration has indicated that its priorities are elsewhere. The department has developed a plan to offer a full-year Linguistics and Media Studies course that, if approved, could be taken for core English credit instead of an elective. If this course is not approved, there is a small chance that linguistics may be offered again as an elective. The advantage of the UbD approach is that, regardless how the course is organized, the same essential questions, enduring understandings, and transfer goals can apply.

Much of the UbD protocol may seem like common sense, and in some ways, it is; most instructors have an idea of where they want students to end up before they begin instruction and want to make their instruction effective and engaging. However, I believe that taking a deliberate UbD approach to curriculum design can be especially useful in the field of linguistics. As the high school linguistics movement grows, resources designed with UbD in mind will be useful to the teachers developing these courses. While introductory linguistics courses in college and in high school are often intended to prepare future linguists, many other students who take linguistics do so in preparation for careers in fields as varied as teaching, criminal justice, or business. All students will become (or already are) adult citizens and consumers of the world. In a discipline as wide-ranging as linguistics, we may ask ourselves, *what do we want future linguists and non-linguists to know when they leave linguistics class*? What should teachers, police officers, scientists, and leaders know about language? By focusing our instruction on our end goals and guiding our course development backwards from these goals, we may find that our students

not only become skilled at linguistic thinking, but approach the world from a more critical and empathetic perspective.

References

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[i] For more information on this initiative, see Larson et al's article, "The AP Linguistics Initiative," in the September 2019 issue of *Language*.
[ii] In a four-corners activity, corners of the room are designated as "agree," "disagree," "strongly agree," or "strongly disagree." Statements are read out loud, and students move to the corner of the room that corresponds with their views.