

Article

Culturally Responsive Practices or Assimilation? Views and Practices on Linguistic Diversity of Community College Instructors Working with Multilingual Learners

Yohimar Sivira-Gonzalez

Systems Development & Improvement Center, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA;
sivirayr@ucmail.uc.edu

Abstract: Despite the recent growth of multilingual learners in community colleges, research is still scarce on how instructors perceive and interact with students institutionally classified as English as a second language (ESL). In this paper, I use racialization of language and culturally relevant pedagogy to explain how 6 instructors from first-year freshmen in a community college, serving a high percentage of immigrant multilingual learners, view, understand and operationalize culturally and linguistically responsive practices in their classrooms. I use a qualitative critical approach to analyze data from interviews, fieldnotes, and observations from a year-long study in a community college in a mid-sized city in the South of the United States. I show evidence of instructors' views of students regarding their cultural, linguistic, educational, and class backgrounds. Findings suggest that even when instructors celebrate differences in the classroom and are aware of the cultural differences, their opinions, and academic expectations were sometimes focused on students' lack of confidence to advocate for themselves and their failure to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Despite the best intentions, these expectations still enclosed assimilationist views of language and personhood that require students to communicate in ways that often resemble the American traditional monolingual college student. The study of language from a racial perspective can promote powerful ways to understand how institutions structure and operationalize services to multilingual learners; conscious changes in services may result in more equitable practices for these students.



Citation: Sivira-Gonzalez, Y. Culturally Responsive Practices or Assimilation? Views and Practices on Linguistic Diversity of Community College Instructors Working with Multilingual Learners. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 603. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060603>

Academic Editors: Michele Foster, Sheron L. Mark and Jonathan Baize

Received: 21 April 2023

Revised: 27 May 2023

Accepted: 6 June 2023

Published: 14 June 2023



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Keywords: multilingual learners; community colleges; racialization; academic English

1. Introduction

I use the term multilingual learner to represent the value behind the multiple languages spoken by the student. This is a variation of the term emerging bilinguals that scholars in the US have recently adopted to reflect the multiplicity of languages that students speak in and outside of school. I acknowledge the deficit views behind the term “ESL” and “ELL” and only used them when quoting participants and literature. Multilingual learners (MLs) and their teachers' experiences in US K12 spaces have been extensively documented. Numerous studies have examined teachers' negative assumptions about MLs and how students are blamed for academic difficulties [1–5]. Even though community colleges serve almost half of the US's undergraduate population [6], there is still little research on multilingual learners in community colleges. Approximately 24% of these students come from an immigrant background, MLs accounting for 40% of the enrollment [7]. A national-level examination of English language learners (ELLs) access to and degree of attainment in postsecondary education found that “ELLs lag far behind both bilingual students and monolingual English-speaking students in access to and attainment of higher education” [8]. The data analysis revealed, however, that nonlinguistic factors, such as family income and prior college planning (other than lack of English skills), contributed to the limited access and attainment of “ELLs” in postsecondary education. Little is known, however, about the social structures that might influence multilingual students' academic experiences in

college, especially their interactions with educators. Bunch et al. [9] conducted a systematic study examining the language and literacy demands of community college health programs and instructors' perceptions of the challenges students face in meeting those demands. The authors reviewed math, psychology, and English writing assignments and interviewed instructors about students' literacy difficulties. In most cases, instructors described general academic demands instead of explaining specific literacy issues. Instructors viewed ESL students as unprepared to take science classes, lacking language skills to comprehend text, and unable to write papers using their own words.

Students' learning depends heavily on instructors, and the rapport they build with them is crucial for achieving learning objectives. A teacher's beliefs and expectations are the foundation of their practice [10–12]. Recent studies in community college spaces related to instructors' expectations and beliefs about MLs have focused on instructors' perceptions of teaching practices and language abilities of MLs in various ESL, developmental, and mainstream classes. Other research has focused on creating professional development opportunities for college faculty and staff to work with and support ESL students [13–15]. Research has also consistently shown that institutional language policies are informed by teachers' and administrators' assumptions and general beliefs about students. For example, in an early study of immigrant students' transition from high school to community college, Harklau [16] described how the label "ESL" had a positive meaning in high school while in college, it was framed as "inexperienced users of English", and students were placed in low-level classes. The findings of this study support the notion that ESL students are viewed as unable to master academic language.

While past research is consistent with the notion of multilingual students as deficient English language users, this qualitative study seeks to understand how community college instructors' views of language and culture mediate their relationships with multilingual learners and their classroom practices. I examine how educators' expectations are based on preconceived ideas of what students need to accomplish to attain a level of English that corresponds to the idealized version of a white native speaker of English. In this study, community college instructors often described students' cultural backgrounds by highlighting the cultural diversity they bring to the institution while holding conflicting views about their abilities to meet academic expectations. I argue that educators' beliefs need to be studied to understand how their perceptions of students may be influencing their practices. In this paper, I focus on notions of academic language and standardization of language to study how community college instructors view multilingual learners' language skills and set academic expectations.

Academic Language and Raciolinguistic Perspectives

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the relationship between academic performance and the mastery of academic language and literacy skills in multilingual students in American high schools [17,18]. However, unpacking the definition of academic language and how the operationalization of this term privileges native speakers and marginalizes multilingual learners is crucial to understand its future implications [19]. The work of Cummins [20] on basic interpersonal communicative skill (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) separated academic language and conversational language. When making this distinction MLs are situated in the conversational English category. The ideology that MLs can manage conversational language easier than academic language positions MLs as incapable of composing academic texts; therefore, their academic performance may also be deemed deficient.

Bunch and Martin [17] make special consideration of this topic in their work by claiming the following:

The argument usually goes something like this: Students, especially language learners or those speaking languages or varieties of language not privileged by dominant socioeconomic and racial groups, must learn to use specialized forms of

language before being able to successfully engage in “mainstream” content-area instruction. (p. 539)

Many scholars over the years have ascribed to this idea of academic language being more specialized and specific than everyday language. Since Cummins’ [20] BICS and CALP, the discourse around academic language has evolved but still maintained a dichotomy of separating academic language as this abstract and complex concept that requires high-level skills while everyday language is considered less complex, less specialized, and easy to manage by MLs outside the academic scope. Many studies done in US K-12 contexts in which academic language is deemed as the language of schooling or the language of academic success [20–22]. Uccelli et al. [23], while studying language demands of school texts, claim that academic language “includes 2 subconstructs: (1) discipline-specific academic language (e.g., science- or math-specific terms: gene, hypotenuse) and (2) cross-disciplinary academic language, useful in all content areas (e.g., terms used across content areas: hypothesis)” (p. 77). This definition supports the idea that academic language is more related to content than the mastery of language skills, such as the use of complex vocabulary and grammar structures, as many other authors have suggested. Martinez and Mejia [24] claim that academic language, rather than an “empirically observable set of linguistic features”, is actually an “idealized notion of the kinds of language valued in schools” (p. 53). This idealized notion of language is legitimized in schools by setting academic expectations that benefit students from the dominant mainstream culture.

Students have learned that English language proficiency and accurate use of language are highly valued in schools. Bunch and Martin [17] claim that focusing on only discussing linguistically minoritized students from a prescriptive view of academic language reinforces the negative narratives of what MLs can do with language in the classroom. A raciolinguistic ideological perspective is crucial to study the privilege given to academic English to marginalize multilingual students’ language practices. Wei [25] addressed Rosa and Flores’ [26] raciolinguistic ideologies regarding academic language by adding that the concept of academic English is “a category and a categorizing device that emerges as part of broader raciolinguistic ideologies that position racialized and minoritized learners as illegitimate language users, linguistically deficient and unacademic” (p. 7).

The racialization of language occurs when social structures influence language use and beliefs around language use and speakers. Alim’s [27] ethnographic work in a high school in Philadelphia analyzed teachers’ discourses and the differentiation they made between Standard English and Vernacular English. Teachers often viewed Black students’ language as something to “eradicate” (p. 187). Alim [27] concluded that by deeming Black English and Black Speakers as inferior, teachers were enacting ideologies focused on White supremacy. Alim found that the language tends to be labeled as “standard”, “official”, “normal”, “appropriate”, and “respectful” (p. 188) and is that of the ones with power in the society. Although this paper is focused on educators’ views of foreign-born MLs, students referred to here are mostly Black Africans and Latinos who are considered students of color in the US. Understanding race relations in the US and their connections to historically stigmatized language practices is crucial to contextualize why and how language can be described as a racialized category. Garcia et al. [28] described racialized bilinguals as people positioned as inferior racially and linguistically due to oppression and colonization. I take this idea of racialization to explain how the language practices and academic skills of multilingual students in a community college may be shaped by this process of racialization based on language.

By looking at academic language as a racialized category, the construct of race may be used to examine how the language practices of MLs are perceived by the White Listening Subject. Ideas and definitions of academic language are usually centered on Whiteness and how White native speakers are innately perceived as capable of producing the language necessary to thrive in schools [19,27].

Other scholars have also studied raciolinguistics with a focus on the listening subject regarding immigrant students, especially Latinos perceived as deficient language users [29].

The standardization of language is related to the ideas of racialization because minoritized speakers are deemed as deficient when being assessed through the lens of a perceived “Standard English”. From ethnographic work in schools in Chicago, US, Rosa [30] used the term languagelessness to explain how based on ideas of standardization and racialization, a group’s linguistic capacity is considered limited. I use these ideologies of language standardization to frame my understanding of what language and academic skills are valued in a community college. The racialized views of language “shift the focus from the linguistic practices of the speaker/writer toward the perceiving practices of the listener/reader” [19]. The work of Cushing and Snell [31] in England demonstrates how the dominant ideology of standard English is reinforced in schools through language policing in the inspectorate’s practice. Through metalinguistic tokens such as “correct grammar”, “full sentences”, “errors”, and “accent” used in policies and school documents, Cushing and Snell [31] analyzed a corpus of state reports and policies. Findings suggest that when students did not use Standard English, their language skills were described as “poor” and “having limited vocabulary” (p. 15), which was also used by authorities as an indicator of students’ low academic ability. Educators might negatively view students whose writing and speaking language skills do not align with the standardized, White, native-speaker use of English but in subtle ways in which their language skills are classified as not good enough, not specific, or complex enough to be high-level classes. These views may likely influence the practices in the classroom in terms of interaction with students, academic expectations, and overall perceptions of students’ potential.

Recent research rejects the dichotomy of academic and everyday English and shows how MLs’ language practices are complex, and their home languages aid the development of literacy skills [32]. An example of complexity in language managed by MLs is presented in studies by Martínez and Mejía [24] and Flores [19], in which they demonstrate Latinx students manipulating complex morphologies when mixing English and their home language to enhance meaning in informal conversations.

I use this literature to aid my analysis of how general education instructors in a community college, indicate their beliefs about language and engage in language practices while interacting in classrooms. I argue that educators’ concepts and views of the students and underestimation of their language skills are influenced by discourse reflecting dominant ideologies of broader society and the institution concerning academic language. I study teachers’ tacit assumptions about multilingual students’ home languages to understand the deeper relationship between language, culture, and race in schools as institutions, which hold power in society. Dominant ideologies of what is valued in schools and societies can influence students’ identities and self-worth in relation to the language.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)*

Before exploring the definition of CRP, I want to start with a perspective of the term culture. According to Sensoy and Diangelo [33], culture refers to the characteristics of a group of people that can be visible and identifiable but often unrecognized by most group members. Over the years, scholars have debated surface, shallow, and deep culture and how it involves implicit and explicit behaviors. In the definition of CRP by Ladson-Billings [34], the understanding of students’ experiences and ways of knowing the world is at the center of teaching. CRP has three propositions: academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political critical consciousness [35]. Ladson-Billings [34] claims that “far too many teachers believe if they make some effort to represent diverse cultures, they are exhibiting cultural competence” (p. 71). Cultural competence is defined as the “ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than [their] own” [36]. Cultural competence requires students’ knowing and understanding the language, traditions, and histories of their own culture and being able to use that knowledge to bridge gaps in the dominant cultures. Socio-political critical consciousness refers to the ability to analyze power structures and work collaboratively to change systems

of oppression, otherwise, without critical consciousness, “schools turn into places that mirror society instead of improving it” [37]. In this paper, I want to emphasize cultural competence and socio-political critical consciousness to explore how community college instructors who constantly interact with multilingual students disclose their views on cultural and linguistic diversity and how those views influence academic expectations set for students.

2.2. *Setting and Methods*

As part of a larger qualitative study, I investigated the experiences of multilingual immigrant students in their first year of college. About 12,000 students attend Trinity Community College in Cloud City (Pseudonym), including over 1000 first-year students. Thirty-five percent of students identify as underrepresented minorities, of whom thirty percent are black and ten percent are Latino/a. Approximately 80 percent of TCC’s students are low-income individuals seeking higher education to ultimately enter the workforce or progress to four-year institutions. In Fall 2020, more than 500 first-year students were classified as ESL, taking not only English language classes but also college-level content classes.

Data presented in this paper is based on interviews and field notes from six first-year instructors from general education courses and college-level classes. Except for one Black Latino/a instructor who is bilingual, they are mostly White monolingual English speakers. During the Spring and Fall of 2021, I conducted interviews ranging from 60 to 80 min in duration. In interviews with instructors, I explored the current demographics of their classes, their knowledge and perceptions about students’ backgrounds, and their challenges and perceptions regarding having multilingual students in their classes. Additionally, I asked about the strategies and adaptations they make in their courses specifically for MLs, as well as specific institutional services offered to them. I aimed to facilitate a discussion with instructors about expectations and classroom interaction with linguistically diverse students. To support and expand the information from the interviews, I observed around 20 h of classes with two instructors and took field notes primarily focused on their interactions with students.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

After data collection, I used a software called otter.ai premium to generate generic transcripts of all interviews. As this was a machine-generated transcript, I edited each transcript to accurately represent what participants said. In this transcription process, I did not focus on non-verbal communication as much as I tried to capture confusion, hesitations, and general use of language. Some of the transcription conventions used to transcribe interviews included (.) full stop, not necessarily the end of a sentence, (?) rising intonation including questions, (,) a gap between utterances, and (. . .) a sentence which is partially transcribed. Before finding patterns, codes, and generalizations, I familiarized myself with the data. I went systematically through field notes and interview transcripts. Reflecting, finding exceptions, and questioning was the first approach to data analysis to later engage in developing codes and themes. I used Dedoose, a web-based program to analyze qualitative data in which I first created analytical memos, to later reread the transcripts and create specific codes (mostly in vivo) which better described and condensed the participants’ meaning-making process. After I coded all interviews, I used the co-occurrence of memos and codes tool on Dedoose, which helped me have a visual representation and frequency of memos and codes, trends on code application, and connections among codes and memos. I later classified the codes into categories and subcategories. For example, data initially coded as views of students’ backgrounds, perceptions of students, and descriptions of ESL students were categorized under the subcategory cultural views and later into a bigger category, Views of the Students.

3. Findings

My findings sections examine three themes that emerged from my analysis. First, I highlight how instructors disclose their views about diversity in the classroom and their efforts to practice culturally responsive teaching by trying to tailor instruction to MLs needs. I then examine how, despite demonstrating inclusive practices, instructors' conflicting views of students often reflected stereotypical beliefs about students' cultures and academic abilities. Finally, I analyze the complexity and contradictoriness of interviewees' notions of multilingual students' lack of academic English skills and self-advocacy and help-seeking skills when participants discussed academic expectations for MLs.

3.1. Culturally Responsive Efforts

During the interviews, when I asked questions about instructors' knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, they all responded by giving examples of efforts to understand students and value their cultural assets. Elizabeth, a writing instructor, and Angela, who teaches a general education class, immediately connected cultural backgrounds with "food" or "cultural traditions". Elizabeth said: "I'd love to talk to them about food, we love to talk about food and try food". These statements were common among instructors regarding culture and the diversity of students represented in the classrooms. Faculty often saw this diversity as an opportunity to "learn from them" as students can share their cultures. Based on those ideas of culture, Angela also commented on creating an activity where multilingual students could "showcase themselves . . . one holiday that is specific for them, or one type of food". For Angela and Elizabeth, this type of activity could encourage students to feel included in the class as "everybody gets to be part of it". Angela also mentioned that "old ESL students" often have careers at home before coming to the US. Disclaimers such as "I don't want to overgeneralize", "other instructors", or "people tend to think" were common among instructors' responses regarding their views of students. However, often, those disclaimers were accompanied by assumptions, generalizations, and stereotypes about students' backgrounds.

Melissa and Joseph indicated using strategies to collect student information not only to get to know them but to better prepare for future challenges. Joseph, a writing instructor, used a "literacy narrative" to help students "investigate their language practices and their relationship to their language learning journey . . . backgrounds, so they talk a lot about where they came from, their experiences first getting here in the US, and challenges". Melissa, who teaches a general education class, created a student survey and when students who are in the "category of learning English" had missing assignments she checked the survey responses to understand "what's going on with them". A student reporting on not having "Microsoft Word on their computers" or having attended (or not) school prior to attending TCC was helpful to understand how to approach the different situations with students' not doing homework. She also recalled an incident in which a student was committing plagiarism. Melissa stated: "I never think the student is deliberately doing anything that's quite wrong, right? In my mind, it's always 'what does this student not yet understand?'"

This point about plagiarism illustrated by Melissa coincided with my observation notes in which a student commented on not having prior experience with the word "plagiarism", stating that in her country and her language, plagiarism did not exist, and copying and pasting from the internet was a common practice. This type of situation was very frequent during my observations in the classroom, especially those dealing with writing classes. Melissa continued explaining that she tried to understand the concept of "school" for students and what it meant for them instead of assuming no educational background. She indicated interacting with students and asking if they come from "schools with no books" or when "somebody came every day and taught you some lesson, right, and that was what school was for you. And then you came to the United States?" Students' responses to those questions helped her understand students' struggles and responsively act upon the issues

without assuming students “don’t know how to behave” as former experiences she had in other institutions where she worked.

Melissa provided another example, recalling an incident in which two students who were siblings delivered the same responses to the assignments, and Melissa, during the interview, reported dealing with the situation as follows:

There was a brother and sister I had one summer, and they were taking the class together and I didn’t realize they were brother and sister. I, you know, I had no idea and, uhm, I started noticing their answers were all the exact same answers and I thought “What is going on here?” I didn’t, you know, I was just sort of a mystery to me. Well, so I asked and the sister said “well, I’m helping my brother ‘cause he works so that you know we have. I’m really honest with them and say “I will be honest with you” and said “I’m not sure your culture is wrong”. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s right”, however, in our country. It’s not, it’s OK for you to help him, but it’s not OK for him to have the same answer or not think of his own answer.

And I said, you know, in our country, people expect you to have your own answer to something, and I know that is really different than what your country or your culture, would say? Well, of course you should help him. He’s feeding your family.

We don’t live in that culture right now, and if you do this in my class, I’m going to talk it through with you. But if you do it in another professor’s class, they’re going to fail you. They may even report you and you may, you know, So, I, it’s my job to make sure you understand how this system works, whether we agree with it or not.

And so, I’m really honest with them and say, you know, I’m not really convinced that this is the right way to do things, but it is the way it’s done.

This excerpt represents an example of how Melissa engaged in a discussion of differentiation of students’ cultures versus the US when she said, “our culture” and “your culture”. Instead of punishing the students for plagiarism, she assumes that students’ behaviors come from a lack of understanding of US culture and conduct typical of the students’ cultural background in which family is valued in a way that copying from your sibling’s homework might be a commonly accepted practice.

In addition to providing commentary on the importance of knowing students’ backgrounds, Chelsea and Joseph also reported using students’ cultural and educational background information to plan their lessons. Chelsea, who teaches ESL writing, commented on “eliciting participation in a variety of ways” to call for students’ cultural background and what participation “looks like for them”. She reported offering “ways for them to write and then communicate their ideas in writing . . . or ways for them to work in small groups or in partners”; she also described it as trying “to build a lot on prior knowledge, so instead of just me starting to explain something, I try to build from the knowledge of the class”. The idea to use different ways of participation alludes to Chelsea’s understanding that:

some communities feel . . . have different values around like being the person to volunteer to speak during class. Like sometimes that in some places that scene is like “oh wow, that student’s really smart” and in other cultures that scene is like “oh, that student thinks they’re flashy and they think they know it all”. So, I know that that’s the kind of people that aren’t going to have the same idea and like in the US, we tend to reward people raising their hand or speaking up in academic settings.

Chelsea understands that students’ cultural backgrounds might influence class participation. She also makes an interesting comparison of what is valued in US classrooms regarding students’ participation, which might look different for multilingual students not being used to acting like other students in academic settings. So, Chelsea did not

seem to measure multilingual students' success based on idealized versions of American classrooms because immigrant students have different ideas of participation. Along with this idea of participation, Chelsea mentioned that even when she did not "want to make generalizations" about the students, she later added that when working with students from Somalia, she has ideas about what students think of "things like family or education". She also commented on having experiences with how students from China "approach education in China and how they might approach education here". When students are from Mexico, Chelsea thinks that their background as Spanish speakers interfere with their learning of grammar in English. She added, "if they are translating in their head and it's like, it doesn't quite work or things like that".

Despite not wanting to generalize, Chelsea's understanding of her students' background and her own experiences with those cultures shaped her linguistic and academic expectations to compare them with students' prior experiences in their home countries, such as the examples she gave of Somalia and China. She also used her own linguistic background to express ideas of students' possible challenges with the language, as in the example with Spanish speakers translating "in their heads". Joseph agreed with Chelsea on the notions of students' first language influencing "language learning and acquisition of English" and acknowledged that knowing students' "first language" allowed him "to see language transfer". Both, Chelsea, and Joseph, described examples of students' home languages negatively affecting English language learning. Both instructors understand home language and English as two separate systems and use such views to justify students' challenges with writing.

In addition to socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, the views of students from the instructors' perspectives dealt with religion. Chelsea and Joseph specifically gave examples of students' religious practices also influencing their performance in college. They both commented on students having religious responsibilities that made them "tired" and unable "to study". Chelsea mentioned that some students "don't have to work on the weekend, but their family spends all day at church on Sunday". These circumstances put a lot of "pressure" and "stress" on students as they must get "good grades" to later "be able to provide" for their families. Joseph, on the other hand, mentioned the "requirements of Ramadan and what that means [. . .] and the kind of strains and stresses that that puts on students when you can't eat or drink, you're like, I still got to write that paper". Joseph explained that understanding "what students got going on" helped him make "small accommodations that could help them still be successful and be able to celebrate that". Joseph does not only respect students' religious responsibilities but also includes them in their everyday lessons. He provided examples in which students' research topics "that are applicable and important for their home contexts, so that I can learn more about it and so that they can start to think about it in a critical way and you know really kind of reflect on that as well". Joseph reported using students' backgrounds as an asset instead of a barrier to learning, setting achievable expectations that might be more meaningful to students.

3.2. Instructors' Beliefs and Perceptions about Multilingual Students' Academic Language Skills

When instructors were asked about their experiences having multilingual learners in the classroom and their perceptions about these students' language skills, they often referred to ideas of grammar, writing, accent, and language remediation for multilingual students. Chelsea, who teaches writing, explained that MLs must develop skills to properly email in academic settings. She commented on teaching students "why we're saying certain things and how to format it. Because, you know, that could make a huge difference if someone is interacting with a professor in a way that it's perceived as rude. So, who's going to explain that?"

Students in her class should "be able to communicate complex ideas and opinions in English". Chelsea also emphasized wanting students "to have the tools to be able to express complex ideas in writing in English . . . that would be useful to them as they continue their journey towards their academic and career goals". However, Abby, a general education

instructor, criticized this focus on writing from the ESL program at TCC, she said: “totally focused on writing, reading, and vocabulary. No speaking. So that’s been the missing link”. Abby reported having some students that “were incredibly hard to understand”, and later elaborated on having “students from Argentina” and “an Islamic student” who were also hard to understand; so, she thinks that TCC is not providing conversational classes that would allow these students to improve speaking skills. She later detailed that students “are good at the classwork, but by the time they get to the clinicals at the end, and cannot speak well, they have a terrible time”. Abby separated students’ language abilities when referring to speaking in English and their abilities to master content in class. Even though MLs can manage the classwork, they are still perceived as needing remediation because of their oral language skills.

Melissa, during the interview, agreed with this critique by saying that students in the ESL program are not encouraged to speak. I often heard instructors during meetings commenting on “ESL students not having a lot of vocabulary” or “students are not good at speaking” and the lack of speaking skills required in college-level classes, more specifically those in health-related programs. However, taking into consideration these ideas of multilingual students being different from other students, I asked Joseph what differences he saw among what he called “Mainstream” and “Multilingual”, and he reported on differences “in terms of time, how long it takes to accomplish a task”. In response to these students’ characteristics and needs, Joseph adapts his language use by “minimizing use of certain idioms”, not being “too wordy”, and “restat[ing] it again. Thus, “I repeat myself a lot” and “[I am] careful with the language”. This type of adapted language is tailored to “[a] student [who] does not have much English, you know they’re limited English proficient” Joseph endorsed the common idea of multilingual students having “limited English” skills. The adaptations provided are based on a generalized view of students not having the necessary English skills needed to understand what is being said in the classroom. These views of students’ language abilities often permeated what instructors thought multilingual students could accomplish in their classes and in college, so in the Section 3.3, I will expand these ideas and present evidence of how instructors articulated their academic expectations for multilingual students.

Following this idea of how multilingual students are different from the mainstream student, Angela commented that “what I always tell them, like you can get in A, you just may have to put in more time than your counterpart that’s grown up here in this type of school system”. She continued explaining that although she “feels horrible”, she still encourages to “put in more time than a traditional student because they’re going to have to spend more time at tutoring, at the writing center, at all these things and so, you know, you know a lot of times if they start getting discouraged with their grades in other classes”. Angela thinks that multilingual students are at a disadvantage and need more support and more effort than the “traditional student” due to their lack of prior experiences with schooling in the US. These ideas of students being disadvantaged may come from instructors’ views of MLs’ language skills and language use. This idealized language proficiency that MLs should have in relation to the so-called traditional student, possibly a “native speaker of English”.

However, respondents also commented on more explicit examples in which multilingual learners were described by “other instructors” in a discriminatory way. The interviewees mentioned specific “racist” incidents and unfair treatment from these “other instructors” towards multilingual students. “Get those people out of my class, get those ESL people out of my class, I can’t help them, you know, they’re not doing the work” Abby exclaimed during the interview quoting an instructor who referred to multilingual students in such a way during a public meeting with faculty members. Abby expressed being “really upset”, but at the same time, she acknowledged that this faculty member “was articulating the ugly truth, which was, we’re not prepared to deal with these students, what do we do?” This incident prompted her to create an action plan to support multilingual students and train instructors. Joseph commented with a similar perspective as Abby during the

interview. He added that “I’ve seen some faculty that perceived them as just, like, Alien. I don’t, I don’t know what to do, I don’t, I’m scared to do anything because I don’t want to offend them, I don’t want to do this, so people see them as deficient. I think that’s probably one of the more common reactions”. In addition to providing commentary on the idea of other faculty members lacking the knowledge to work with multilingual students, Joseph continued: “teachers will see them as being . . . unprepared, should not be in this classroom until they’re able to get to a certain level they’ve got to be able to draft at least a paragraph or they should not be in my class”. This notion of multilingual students being “deficient” once again comes from their deficient writing abilities and the expectations of the language these students should be able to produce to take college-level classes.

Instructors need to “rephrase” their language instead of “patronizing them [students] or talking down to them . . . ESL students aren’t stupid, they pick up on that, I think that turns them off from other instructors because they’re like you’re talking to me like I’m stupid, you know? I’m not stupid”, added Angela when I asked about perceptions of multilingual students in the college. To Angela, “patronizing” students impacted them in a way that they “turned off”. While most of the instructor participants of this study agreed that other faculty members viewed multilingual students as deficient and did not take the time and effort to support them, Angela added a new perspective to this issue. She asserted: “I’ve seen some instructors that, you know, almost baby or coddle our ESL students to where they will not let him struggle with some of the material, and they almost do it for them”. This notion of “coddling” multilingual students is also problematic, to Angela. This represents a view of learning in which letting “students struggle with materials” might be considered beneficial and necessary to develop language and academic skills. Melissa also provided commentary on conversations she had with students reflecting a similar notion to what Angela explained. She said:

I have had some students tell me that they feel like they are perceived as being not as intelligent because they don’t speak English and I know that from my own research that that’s an issue that a lot of professors perceive their students that don’t speak English as not very smart and so I try to be really supportive around that and help them understand that that’s wrong, right? It’s not, it’s not . . . It’s a form of racism and prejudice and that it’s important.

In contrast to the subtle ways in which Joseph, Abby, and even Angela referred to those views and incidents with the multilingual students, Melissa clearly identified those behaviors as “racism and prejudice” on behalf of “other professors”. This racism was based on language, as she referred to the students that “don’t speak English”. During my class observation, I witnessed Melissa having these types of discussions during a class on cultural differences.

3.3. Academic Expectations Based on Cultural and Linguistic Beliefs

When instructors were asked about their expectations for multilingual students, they repeated a pattern concerning students’ linguistic skills but also in relation to other parameters such as their attitudes, skills, and values students might lack. For instance, Elizabeth mentioned that students’ “attitude about the workload” is more important than the “willingness to put in the work outside of the class”. In several opportunities during the interview, she commented on some multilingual students taking “too lax of an approach to the course” in addition to those who “have a full-time job” or “caring for their families”. She mentioned that at the beginning of the semester, “if I look at the group as a whole, I can usually identify pretty quickly who will be successful in the class and who will fail . . . But it’s usually less than half that are really, truly prepared”. In contrast to what Joseph and Chelsea did by getting to know the students first, Elizabeth thinks students’ attitudes toward the workload predict their success in her class. By “too lax of an approach” Elizabeth implies that multilingual students might not approach her course with the right attitude. Putting in the effort to complete the assignments by coming to class is not enough, and those perceived attitudes helped her set expectations for these students.

Angela and Abby also focused their expectations on matters other than academics. For example, Angela emphasized the importance of “asking for help when they need it, not when they’re so far behind, but as soon as they don’t understand something, ask and keep asking”. These ideas of help-seeking imply that students are also responsible for receiving “the help”. On this “asking for help” as an expectation, Melissa also commented that “the most important thing I want them to understand is ‘If I take a class where I have to write a paper, I know I need to go to the library to get help.’” In this respect, Elizabeth commented that “seeking the resources. Just asking their instructors . . . ‘where can I get help’ if I need it is important, just that little simple question”.

However, also “feeling comfortable and confident, more confident in themselves, and being able to communicate when they need something” are critical. Elizabeth continued explaining that:

a lot of times these students feel inadequate or, I hate to even say this, but I think sometimes they feel dumb because maybe they’ve been treated that way by other people and so I want them to know when they leave like you are not dumb, you are incredible. You know this is my goal for them. Boost them up, you know.

Students “feeling dumb” seems to be a result of the interaction with “people” who made them feel “inadequate”. This notion of confidence reinforced by instructors during the interviews is not solely the student’s responsibility, and Elizabeth agreed with that when she commented on students being “treated that way by other people”. There is a connection between confidence, communication, and asking for help, according to the instructors. If students are more confident, they can communicate effectively to seek help, and this “effort can go a long way” because students are showing instructors “care” and “effort” in the class. For instructors, asking for help indicates that students are invested in the class and consequently care about college and their education. Joseph also commented that being consistent in communication with the instructor is an indicator of success in his class. Chelsea suggested a different view of communication more related to the speaking ability to communicate, she mentioned: “I want them to be able to communicate complex ideas and opinions in English”. Chelsea is more concerned about students’ language ability to write and speak in English. Communication with instructors might also help students set their own expectations for classes. Elizabeth mentioned that she wants students “to reduce the course load a little bit” because “students taking like four or five classes, and to me that’s just way too many for a first semester of college for nonnative speaker of English to take five classes you know, so I think managing expectations and time”. Chelsea commented on a similar idea in terms of “time management” so students can do homework on time without piling up assignments for the end of the semester.

More related to academics, Elizabeth set expectations focused on writing conventions such as “interpreting ideas . . . using transitions appropriately . . . developing a proper thesis statement using parallel verbs”. Later emphasizing research skills, she wants students “to be able to collect, you know, to understand, better understand the process of gathering, research”. Angela also provided specific examples of academics highlighting expectations focused on writing and students attending tutoring services to “get help” with their writing.

When I asked instructor participants what their perceptions or knowledge about students’ backgrounds were, an appealing comparison emerged from Joseph and Elizabeth’s responses. First, Elizabeth compared her experiences working with “Cuban students who were medical doctors in their country”. She described these students as “the best students . . . who were very focused and understand the time that it takes to successfully, that you must put into successfully complete a course”. Having “formal education”, for Elizabeth, makes these students “unique” and “interesting to observe” as well as more focused on their educational success. She later explained that when students “who are formally educated come into our program”, she “knows” they will “be very successful, I have no doubt about that”. Instructors believe that previous formal education is a predictor of success in a writing class and community college because students with formal education have the background knowledge required to navigate college. On the contrary, when Elizabeth had

“refugee students” she noticed “a great difficulty with the final paper because it’s a research paper and so the idea of collecting, you know, gathering, research, and then properly citing that research is so foreign to them”. Elizabeth continued giving other examples. She talked about “Nepali students” who “are often more reserved, quieter, and don’t want to challenge their professors in any way, because it’s seen as a sign of disrespect, so those students were always the most difficult to get, for me, was the most difficult to get them engaged”. While Chelsea used different types of participation to engage students to make them feel more comfortable because of their cultural differences, Elizabeth’s ideas viewed refugees and Nepali students as being more challenging to work with because of their cultural and background differences. While I noted students’ struggles with research papers during my field notes, and they also commented on these issues during my observations. I also noticed that students required more scaffolded instructions and specific guidance to complete the required assignments.

Elizabeth later juxtaposed the refugee students’ “foreign ideas” of a research paper with the Cuban students who were doctors in Cuba. She elaborated by saying: “This is not a foreign idea to collect information from various sources, put it together without plagiarizing”. Elizabeth’s experiences with students from Cuba, and other students from refugee backgrounds differed and was a predictor of future success in her class. Research activities were “foreign” for refugee students. This is an example of how instructors’ perceptions of students’ histories with school and language influenced teachers’ ideas of what they could or could not accomplish. Instructors made predictions based on students’ prior educational background founded also on their own experiences working with former students from certain countries of origin such as Cuba, Nepal, and some African countries.

Joseph, on the contrary, reported setting expectations according to students’ backgrounds. The excerpt below provides an explanation of Joseph’s adapted expectations:

Some students are going to come here, very, very, prepared and adapt to those academic conventions very easily, whereas other students are going to come here with zero preparation or very little preparation and I think as instructors, it is our responsibility and it’s our job to meet them where they’re at, and to not place unfair expectations on students.

For Joseph, students’ prior experiences and what he called “preparation” is crucial for the setting of expectations. He seems to set lower expectations for students with low levels of writing skills, which might seem fair but can also represent a risk of undermining students’ abilities to accomplish academic goals. These practices may seem culturally appropriate for educators but can also harm students in the long term.

4. Discussion and Implications

Instructors expressed a desire to build relationships and set expectations in a manner that considered the students’ backgrounds and cultural awareness. Often, discussions of cultural awareness, despite the best intentions to care for students, revealed instances of superficial caring, and surface-level accountability for cultural differences, as Ladson-Billings [34] suggested, educators tend to express genuine concerns to include MLs’ cultures in their classroom by representing diversity and sometimes providing accommodations. Yet, still held restrictive views of language when referring to MLs’ skills, such as comparing non-native and native speakers.

This study supports previous literature on standardization and racialization [37], in highlighting the subtle ways in which the abilities of MLs were considered limited, as in “students are hard to understand” or “not having a lot of vocabulary” but also when academic expectations revolved around the lack of personal values and traits such as putting in the “effort”, “having “confidence”, or “abilities to communicate and seek help” in an academic setting. Success for instructors was focused on the acquisition and development of language skills but also personal qualities perceived as valued and relevant for the “American society” that reinforces a notion of success focused on individualized merits considered natural and normal [38] and undermines the oppressive system in which minoritized

populations, like multilingual immigrant students, get neglected and discriminated against. Multilingual students whose language skills were deemed deficient need remediation, intervention, and extra effort, according to these instructors. When academic expectations are focused on mastering Standard English, even when students might excel at content knowledge, ideologies rooted in nativespeakerism, are still being reinforced. In subtle ways, when instructors compared cultural backgrounds and differentiate a “traditional student” and “ESL” student, they implicitly articulated views focused on stereotypical beliefs of native speakers being more competent in English [39], which is often centered on Whiteness [40]. This differentiation implicitly portrayed the immigrant student as failing to use English as a native speaker. This is a problematic view that has implications for race. Additionally, when instructors referred to advocacy and confidence, they suggested idealized characteristics of a White mainstream college student. Those traits, according to the instructors, were desirable and would translate into better academic achievement for multilingual students. It is important to acknowledge how these dominant discourses in macro contexts and institutional structures reproduce stereotypes against immigrant multilingual students.

The notions of accent, grammar, and academic writing discussed by instructors in this study support Martinez and Mejia’s [24] claims that academic language is an “idealized notion of the kinds of language valued in schools” rather than an “empirically observable set of linguistic features” (p. 53). This idealized notion of language is legitimized in schools by setting academic expectations that benefit students from the dominant mainstream culture. I showed how instructors’ expectations indeed reflected that being proficient in English translated into using complex ideas in writing, APA conventions, and writing long paragraphs—skills that multilingual students lacked and needed to work on to pass a class considered a college-level class. These findings also support other work [9,16] regarding instructors’ considering multilingual students’ language skills inadequate for college-level classes.

More than perceptions about language use, instructors had views of the students’ cultural values, and personal characteristics such as communication skills, developing confidence, and help-seeking abilities. Similar to the work of Duff [1] and other scholars on North American K-12 scholarship, regarding MLs’ lack of cultural skills and focus on personal characteristics. Even when instructors wanted to avoid generalizations, they often discussed ideas, and stereotypes about students’ cultures and marked specific differences comparing refugees and Cubans, for example. Additionally, when instructors compare MLs’ language abilities and academic skills with what they call “the traditional student”, instructors’ beliefs and expectations are framed from an idealized and normalized perspective of how a college student in the US should act. These unspoken and unconscious assumptions about the students affect the type of learning promoted and privileged in the classroom and what instructors wanted students to achieve.

Even instructors who demonstrated progressive, culturally responsive practices in their views and classroom practices made distinctive considerations about students’ cultures valuing family time and work that might keep them from assimilating to the American school conventions and rules. When Melissa said, “your culture is not wrong” but “we do things differently here”, she reflects views of cultures that are static and imply two different ways to make meaning of school conventions that seem mutually exclusive to one or the other culture. So, if multilingual students want to succeed in college, they should assimilate and learn the behaviors of the “traditional students”. Again, the terms “traditional students” and “non-native speaker” reinforce ideologies of standardization and legitimization of language. When MLs are deemed as not “having a lot of vocabulary” or as “not [being] good at speaking” they are being compared to the idealized version of native speakers who might not need to put forward the extra effort to understand instructions, complete assignments and navigate college in general.

Although other research has explained a dichotomy of the term academic language, by distinguishing between complex and simple language or specialized and general knowl-

edge, I add that this term is often presented in ways educators are unaware of such dichotomies to frame students' language skills. In my study, it was often covered by using terms such as "research skills", "plagiarism", or "language needed to take advanced classes". Understanding these nuances of academic language may help reveal other ways in which educators might unintentionally deem MLs as deficient or lacking academic skills to thrive in college.

I recommend future studies focus on examining community college services provided to MLs beyond general education and ESL classes because participants of this study often discussed instances of discrimination and unfair treatment when students transitioned to their majors such as nursing, communications, etc. Studying language standardization ideologies can promote powerful ways to understand how institutions structure and operationalize services to MLs. If educational institutions are made aware of how they might be reinforcing circulation ideologies of language standardization, the implementation of intentional structural changes in services may result in more equitable practices for linguistically diverse students. I call for a more critical approach to teacher training in community colleges with an emphasis on critical language awareness and issues of race to dive deeper into how educators might unintentionally reinforce dominant discourses about immigrant students, including multilingual learners.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved the Institutional Review Board of University of Louisville under the number 19.0060 from 5 February 2021 through 4 February 2024.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: I thank my research participants who willingly collaborated with me to carry out this research project.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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