Episode 86: Katherine Flowers
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Katherine Flowers about English-only policies, multilingual and translingual approaches to teaching, examining and resisting program language policies, and teaching professional writing.

Katherine Flowers is assistant professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, where she teaches first-year writing, journalism and professional writing, and courses on language and literacy. She received her PhD with a Concentration in Writing Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her work has appeared in journals like *College Composition and Communication*, the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Literacy in Composition Studies*, and *Language Policy*. For her research on English-only policies, she has received a CCCC Emergent Researcher Award and the James Berlin Memorial Outstanding Dissertation Award.

Katherine, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your research focuses on language policies. So you study English-only policies, and you talk about multilingual and translingual approaches to teaching writing and language advocacy. I'm thinking specifically about your article "Resisting and Rewriting English-Only Policies," which was published in Literacy in Composition Studies. Can you talk about your motivations behind this research? And what you're attempting to do through this work?

KF: Yeah, I'd be happy to talk about that, especially because that article turned out completely differently than I was expecting, and was very surprising along the way, and my motivations changed along the way. So, it's tough to say when a research project begins or ends, but I would say that that article has its origins in 2012. So, it took me, you know, seven years to really think it through. But in 2012, I started to hear about more and more local governments in the US trying to make English their only official language, by passing local laws establishing a new official language. And I was really curious about that, just literally wanting to know things like how did this happen? How did we get here? Who is involved? Who writes those kinds of policies? Who revises them? Who circulates them? What effect do they have? How do people discuss them? What do people think of them? So all of those sorts of just basic, curiosity-driven questions I wanted to figure out. And as I got further into that research, I kind of thought, okay, the project is going to be about English-only policies, which I'm interested in, just because I've always been interested in questions of language and power, and what kinds of language are valued and who gets to decide. And, you know, language policies as sort of, you know, one facet of colonialism, of, sometimes, racism and xenophobia, all those sorts of things.

And I thought, okay, I'm going to try to unpack these English-only policies, and then at the end, in the conclusion or something, I'll talk about, in a hypothetical sense, what are some maybe possibilities for resistance? That was my plan. And I thought it would be hypothetical, because I thought, once these language policies pass, they're there to stay. They're almost certainly set in

stone because especially with government language policies, traditionally, once they pass, like, they're there, they usually don't go away.

And so I was really taken by surprise when, in 2015, right before, just a few weeks before I was going to go to the state of Maryland to interview people involved with making English-only policies, one of the places I was studying, Frederick County in Maryland, actually repealed their policy. And that blew my mind. I never thought that would happen in a million years, so I really had to rethink things. Because instead of being like, why are these English-only policies so powerful? I had to reframe that to like, okay, but, you know, maybe it's not just a hypothetical. How do people actually, in practice, resist and rewrite them?

So my motivation with that article ended up being trying to show what's possible in terms of changing approaches to language, both in terms of what successful strategies people in that community used, where they successfully argued that this English-only policy needed to be undone because it was bad for the economy, it was racist, it oversimplified, you know, what language even is, and it was just plain unpopular, which they showed by doing a big petition drive and collecting, you know, 1000s of people that were against it and their signatures. So, I wanted to highlight those strategies and how they combine those strategies and also some of the pitfalls of those strategies like, you know, what happens when arguments about the economy start to sort of eclipse arguments about racism or about, you know, the complexity of language? So, I wanted to show what's possible, for better or for worse. And that's what I tried to do in that article. And I'm still interested in those questions of not just how do English-only policies happen, but then what do people do about them once they're there?

SW: Katherine, so you argue that English-only policies are "often more explicit than tacit." Can you talk more about this and where you see these policies within academic context or discourse. And then also maybe you could talk about how these language policies affect students and writing teachers?

KF: Definitely. So, when I was talking about, or in my writing, when I've written about explicit language policies versus tacit language policies, I think they're both really important. And I was trying to build on some work by Missy Watson and Rachael Shapiro, who in 2018, wrote this article that's, like, one of my touchstones on "Clarifying the Multiple Dimensions of Monolingualism." In that article, they really emphasize how many English-only norms, expectations, ideologies are unspoken, where the concept is so ingrained in us that people don't even need to spell it out. It's like, when we go into a government building, or we go into some workplaces, or we go into some classrooms, it's like, we all know what the deal is. We know it's going to be in English. And it's so embedded, that it doesn't need to be stated explicitly. They're completely right, that that's sort of the most pervasive form of English only in the US and around the world.

For whatever reason, I remain really interested in the more explicit policies, like what happens when people actually do spell it out, like, what's going on there? You know, those tend to be a little bit fewer and far between, but also sort of hypervisible. And I think they can have a real effect on the community because people know, you know, that there is an English-only policy.

So I look a lot at local governments, and a lot of local governments in the US have language policies, some workplaces do, some state governments do.

But they also exist closer to home for us in academic situations, too. So, I'm interested in things like when writing programs do placement based on ACT or SAT scores. SAT and ACT, like many standardized tests in the US, are English-only tests. They're not offered in multiple languages, you can't really, like, choose, like, which language varieties to use. Like, they're English-only tests. And so if a writing program is using that for placement, that program has an English-only policy explicitly, in my view. And then once students get to the classroom, a lot of writing programs have learning outcomes or learning objectives that will say something like "command" or, like, "control" over "standard English" or "standard grammar" or something along those lines. I would say that's an explicit English-only policy, too.

And one situation that comes up a lot, I think, you may have taught in programs like this, I definitely have, is where it's encouraged to have some readings that are more multilingual, but then what students are assessed on is their command of standard English. And so there can be a disconnect between what students are reading versus what students are assessed on. That is one thing I've learned from your work and other people's work is that assessment really is a big deal, sometimes even more than, like, the everyday pedagogical moves we make. Where the rubber hits the road is what is going to determine students' grades, whether students can move on, how students get placed, those kinds of things.

And then one more example I'll give, not just for students, but, like, for us as scholars, is a lot of journals have language policies, too. For example, the last journal that I published in, I double-checked this today, just to make sure, but their author guidelines do say the article has to be in English, but also there have to be abstracts in two languages. So that's sort of an explicit what I would call English Plus policy. So, those are all explicit. So, yeah, there's a lot of tacit things going on. But also, we can also look to really explicit policies, I think. And then in terms of how they affect us, you know, of course, the most important effects are on students, I think.

I think especially in, you know, the classroom setting, English-only policies can really reduce students' life chances, especially with college being so high-stakes, and oftentimes so expensive. If students are placed in such a way that they get behind, or failed in such a way that they get behind, or have a low enough grade that they lose their financial aid status, or that, you know, retention numbers go down, graduation rates go down, that's really having a real impact on students' lives.

And then I think for teachers, it can have a chilling effect. And one way this played out for me, I don't know how common this is, but I hope I'm not...well, I don't know, maybe I hope I'm the only one who's had this happen. But, when I first started teaching, because I was already into language policy research when I started teaching, I was sort of so, you know, English-only discourse and policies can be so tough to think about and so fraught and so painful to confront that I just didn't want to teach about language at all in my classes. I didn't even have, you know, that day on the syllabus to discuss editing or proofreading, or, like, what counts as correct, because I just, I felt paralyzed to even touch that with a 10-foot pole, because I'd seen how sort of toxic it could become. And so I was just scared to deal with it at all.

Now, I've sort of moved past that. And I think some of the work on, like, critical language awareness and things like that has really helped me reframe that and be like, okay, no, it is sometimes better to just jump in and, like, talk with students and ask them questions like, what do you think about this? Or, you know, what's a time when someone corrected you, and it was unhelpful versus helpful, or, like, now I'm more comfortable having those conversations. But I do think, whether there's an English-only policy or whether you're just trying to, like, avoid having an English-only policy, it can have that chilling effect, where you are just like, maybe I won't deal with this at all, which is not ideal.

SW: What does it look like to navigate or facilitate conversations in first-year writing about English-only policies? How do you go about talking with students about standardized English in your writing classroom?

KF: Yeah. So, I do it in a couple of ways. First of all, if I'm bringing in examples, I try to model that sense of critical language awareness, and, you know, language as a resource, language as a right, rather than just a problem. So, if I'm teaching rhetorical analysis, I might bring in, you know, three, or four or five examples. And when I first started teaching, I would make all of those examples, you know, only in English, now, I try to bring in ones from the actual town where I'm teaching, from local organizations, or just local public discourse. And, you know, I try to have at least one in Spanish, because that's the language that I can read other than English. It's rusty, but I can do it. And then maybe one that's, you know, maybe incorporates multiple languages, or it's just a short sign, or, like, something from a local store that's, you know, not just in English to try to just normalize that, and I don't even bring it up as, like, "today, we're going to have multilingual examples." I just say we're doing rhetorical analysis, and then just see if anybody says anything.

And then when we're talking about editing, and, like, proofreading and correctness, and revising, and peer review, some strategies that I use are I do like to ask questions to ask about students' prior experiences. I like to ask things like, I mentioned this before, but just, like, what's a time when someone corrected your writing or your speech? And was it helpful? Why or why not? And try to come up with examples of both and I give examples from my own life of, you know, there are such things as errors and mistakes, like, if I've gotten a student's name wrong, I'm always grateful if they correct me. I tell my students there's a word I misspelled on the cover page of my dissertation when I initially deposited it, and somebody told me, and I was eternally grateful, you know.

So, sometimes being corrected is an act of kindness and generosity, but a lot of the times it's not. A lot of the times it's beside the point. It's not helpful. You're not at that phase in the writing process, or they're not even correct. They don't even get what you were going for, or who the real audience was, or, you know, that there was a method to your madness, you weren't just, it wasn't a mistake, you were doing it on purpose. So, I like to have all those conversations, collect, you know, write all those up on the board, and then talk about how to respond to comments, too.

So, especially for peer review, this comes up a lot, I find. Like, you can talk with students about what would you do if somebody gives you a peer review comment that's just on a small

language issue that is not your main focus right now. What are some ways you could, like, ask for different feedback? Or, what are some ways to decide what to listen to and what to set aside?

One thing I do is after peer review, and after I've given a round of feedback on papers, sometimes I'll say, like, "list the top three things that you got feedback on that you actually do want to change, and then maybe one thing you're not sure about, that you might want to ask me about or think more about, and then, you know, maybe pick one or two hills to die on." And I literally use that expression where I'm like, even if it's something I said, you could still pick it. What's one or two things where you're like, I hear what they were saying, but I'm not going to do that, because that's not what I was going for. That was not my intent. And that could be either linguistically or rhetorically and I think it's just good to practice that. Because that's what we do when we get a lot of feedback on a journal article or something like that. We think about some of it's useful, some of it's not, and being able to navigate that and push back on that sometimes and think critically about it is an important thing to practice.

SW: How can teachers and programs reconfigure their orientations or understandings on language, particularly those with traditional monolingual assumptions about writing? Or what advice would you give teachers and administrators interested in examining and resisting program policies on language that might work against students' linguistic practices?

KF: So, I'd be happy to talk about that. And this is really a tough one because on the one hand, as you suggest, I would say we're living in a sort of golden age of incredible research on translingual theory, translanguaging, raciolinguistic approaches to language, this new emerging school of thought that I'm really excited about that Anne Charity Hudley is developing called liberatory linguistics. Like, there's a lot going on, there's never been more to read, more to use.

But, on the other hand, so many teachers are so overworked and under resourced that I think it's also a lot to expect of people. And so, if anybody just wants to, you know, sit tight, and just survive for another year or two, I think that would be fine. But if you have the time and energy and resources and colleagues that you want to collaborate with on this, I would probably suggest just starting with some questions, and then going to the sort of theory and trying to make changes a little later.

So, these are going to sound really basic, but I think just pausing and asking questions, like, who are my students? What's the linguistic landscape of the community where I teach, or where most of my students are from? What's going on with assessment, both at the classroom level and the programmatic level? Who's being hired? Who's not being hired? Who's being retained? Who's not being retained? What parts of the program are really intractable or entrenched? And what parts are areas where I have more agency or more leeway? I think those questions are really important.

And sometimes you might realize that language is not one of the top five or top ten issues, you know, in your program. Like, it might be the attendance policy is the problem or something, you know. I think it's just good to keep an open mind and approach it with a sense of inquiry. But once, if you do think that, you know, right now the program has more of an English-only policy than I would like, or there's just disparate impacts for students, and I'm not sure where it's

coming from, then language could be something to think about more deeply, both in terms of, you know, what are the readings? What are the assignments? What are the learning outcomes? How is placement working? How is, you know, final grades and being able to move on and get the writing requirement over with, how is that all working? And trying to tackle that, and sometimes it will be hard because sometimes there'll be a disparate impact that doesn't seem like it has to do with language at first, but if you look into it more, you know, that may be part of what's going on. And, you know, that may involve translingual theory or it may involve something else, but I think just looking locally, and asking those questions, and talking with other teachers, is probably the way that I would recommend starting.

And this doesn't always work. Or, sometimes you might run into a brick wall. For example, you know, I think a lot of things I've done in my teaching have gone okay, but there have also been other moments where, like, one time I was interviewing for a WPA job. And I don't know if anyone else has had this experience, but they asked, they described their program and they asked if you were WPA, what are some initiatives you might want to take on or start or something? And I said something about directed self placement being something I was interested in. And they were like, well, that's illegal in our state. And I was like, whoa, so sometimes, you know, you might have, you might think about things in a theoretical sense and then you might realize, oh, that's not the first thing that should be tried here. You know, so sometimes every program is different. Sometimes you have more control over placement, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you have control over your readings, sometimes there are standard readings. So, it's going to be different for everyone, and I think there's a lot of trial and error.

SW: How does your research on language policy influence your approach to teaching professional writing? And where does that show up through your course curriculum, syllabi, assignments, materials, and even conversations with students? And I think, you know, I ask this, because I feel like teaching professional writing often comes with certain assumptions or expectations about what students should be doing, or how they should be writing in ways that often align with a more prescriptive approach to language.

KF: Yeah, definitely. I love this question. I love teaching professional writing. And I'm going tackle this one, I think, from two angles, one in terms of language, and then the other part in terms of, I study people who, like, write policies, so thinking about what I've learned from them as professional writers. So, in terms of language, I totally know what you mean about professional writing having this reputation of, you know, maybe, okay, composition, maybe there's more room to play around, but things get serious in professional writing. At least that's what I, you know, thought when I first started teaching it. But I think what I've learned since then is, really, the average workplace in the US is more multilingual, more linguistically diverse, with more linguistic variation than the average US college composition classroom. I kind of wish that were not the case, but I think oftentimes the most English-centric spaces our students encounter are our classrooms, and that things are actually a lot more fluid and transnational and with multilingual people in their workplaces. So, that's sort of the premise that I like to start from with my classes. And on all my classes, I have a language policy which I adapt a little bit for each class.

For the class I'm working on for next year on grant writing, which I've taught before, but, you know, I tweak every time, I'm just going to read the language policy that I'm going to include for that class, if anybody wants an example. So, I say "This is a course in professional writing, which can be done in any language and in many modes. In your work for this course, you have the right and you're welcome to use the language varieties and styles that best fit your own goals and audiences, in conjunction with those of any community partners you work with [which, the service learning part can get complicated, so that's why I have that in there.] You are also encouraged to cite sources in languages other than English. I know English, can read Spanish, and can figure out how to translate short passages in other languages. If you want to write an extended text in a language other than those two, please provide a translation so I can access your work." And, of course, that language policy is a work in progress. And it's very specific to me where, as I said, I can barely read Spanish okay. But so for everyone it would be different. But I try to just start the class with that as the premise.

I also think about professional writing in terms of all the, you know, people that I've interviewed as language policy makers, as activists, as lawyers, as lobbyists, as politicians, because they've really upended what I think of as, you know, the writing process. Like, it can look so different from what, you know, I learned as a student. So, for example, almost all language policy writing is collaborative. I don't think I've encountered any language policy that is successful that wasn't written by multiple people. So, that's something that I incorporate into my professional writing classes.

And another thing is genre choice. So, I think a lot of us are used to thinking about helping students adapt to different genres. But sometimes we tell them the genre that they're going to be practicing. But one thing I've seen with the people I do fieldwork with is that even before they get to that point, they have to make a lot of choices about what genre to even use. So when people are trying to create a new language policy, they get to choose, is this going to be a bill? Is it going to be an ordinance? Is it going to be a resolution? Is it going to be a ballot initiative? So they get to make all those choices, and they know that there are affordances and constraints to each one. And so I don't necessarily want my students to become language policy writers, but I think the idea of genre choice is more broadly applicable. So it could be even something as simple as, instead of telling students, "you're going to write a resume and a cover letter," it could be, "okay, this unit is about applying for jobs. And then you get to choose based on the job ad you find or the situation you want to be in, are you going to write a resume or a CV? Or, are you going to write a traditional cover letter in a Word document or are you going to practice drafting an email that you could attach your resume to?" So, those sorts of choices and decision making and then, you know, defend what decision you made and explain why is, I think, an important thing that I've picked up on from just observing how people write as part of their work lives or activism that I've tried to bring into the classroom.

And then the one last thing that I've observed is just how blurry the line is between professional writing and academic writing. So, I'm thinking of a few of my participants in particular. One is a politician by day, but he moonlights as a composition adjunct. Like, he teaches composition at a community college and is a politician. And so he does that, he does all of that. And another person that I study is a lawyer who, you know, works as a lawyer as his day job, but has also written and published law review articles, and even some things in academic journals and

academic edited collections. So for people like that, there's not a strict divide between the two sort of types of writing. Like, if you're in law, or certain types of activism, or certain types of government, or, you know, STEM, academic writing and professional writing really bleed together. So I try to emphasize that to my students. And, you know, I used to say things like, "you know, forget everything you learned in your academic writing classes, like, this is a different subject," or something, but I don't say that anymore because I realized that for many of the people that do both, they do both every day and they draw on, you know, all of their past writing experiences to do what they want to do next.

SW: Thanks, Katherine. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.