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No Single English: How a History of the English Language Course Reshapes Student Attitudes toward Grammar, Variation, and Standard English

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of a History of English course on student attitudes toward grammar, language variation, and Standard English. Using a mixed-methods design, the study draws on pre- and post-course survey data alongside qualitative data from student reflections and group discussions. Participants were undergraduate English majors at a public U.S. university, many preparing to become English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. The course emphasized the historical development of English, including processes of language change, alongside sociocultural perspectives on language use. Findings indicate a shift toward more flexible and descriptivist perspectives, including acceptance of language variation and recognition of the legitimacy of diverse dialects. Students attributed these changes to their understanding of English as a historically evolving system. Meanwhile, many participants still valued Standard English in formal and academic contexts, developing a more context-dependent view of language use. Qualitative analysis reveals increased awareness of the social and cultural dimensions of language, as well as a move away from rule-based approaches to grammar. Students expressed support for teaching practices that emphasize communication, context, and audience, rather than isolated correctness. A central insight of the study is that students come to see that there is no single English. These findings suggest that integrating historical linguistics into English teaching programs can support more flexible, inclusive, and effective approaches to grammar instruction. The study has implications for teacher education, particularly in preparing future teachers to address language variation and Standard English in academically rigorous and socially responsive ways.

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1. Introduction

Debates over grammar, correctness, and standard language remain central to English language education. Students are often taught to value Standard English as the primary model for appropriate language use, frequently through rule-based instruction and the correction of nonstandard forms^[1–3]. At the same time, linguistic research has demonstrated that language is inherently variable, that all dialects are systematic and rule-governed, and that judgments about correctness are shaped by social and ideological factors as much as by structure^[4–6]. As a result of traditional instructional practices, students frequently enter English courses with deeply ingrained and change-resistant beliefs about grammar, standardization, and language use. Addressing these beliefs has become an important concern in linguistics and English teaching, particularly in efforts to promote more equitable and socially aware approaches to language^[7–9].

While research has shown that sociolinguistic instruction can influence student attitudes toward language variation and linguistic diversity^[8–10], less attention has been given to the potential role of historical linguistics in shaping those attitudes. Courses in the history of the English language have the potential to challenge students' assumptions that language is static and monolithic. These courses expose students to the diachronic development of English, highlighting processes such as sound change, language contact, and standardization, as well as the variability of English across time.

This study argues that exposure to a diachronic approach can play a significant role in reshaping student beliefs about language. By demonstrating that contemporary norms are the product of historical processes rather than fixed standards, a History of the English Language course can encourage students to reconceptualize language as dynamic, variable, and context-dependent. Drawing on a mixed-methods analysis of survey data, written reflections, and group discussions, this study examines how a linguistically oriented History of the English Language course influences student attitudes toward grammar, language variation, and Standard English, with particular attention to implications for English

teaching and teacher preparation. This study contributes to research in English teaching by demonstrating the potential of historical linguistics to support more flexible, inclusive, and pedagogically effective approaches to grammar instruction, complementing existing sociolinguistic approaches.

2. Literature Review

Research on language attitudes has consistently shown that beliefs about grammar and correctness are shaped by broader social and ideological frameworks. Central to this work is the concept of standard language ideology, which positions one variety of a language as inherently correct, neutral, and superior to others. Milroy^[5] argues that standardization is closely tied to the imposition of uniformity and to the marginalization of linguistic variation, while Lippi-Green^[4] critiques the “standard language myth,” demonstrating how dominant language norms become naturalized and linked to judgments about intelligence, professionalism, and legitimacy. Foundational work in language ideology further emphasizes that such beliefs are socially constructed and maintained through institutional practices^[11,12]. From this perspective, students' beliefs about correctness are not simply linguistic but reflect deeply embedded social assumptions.

This framework has been especially influential in educational contexts, where language practices intersect with issues of power, identity, and access. Baker-Bell^[7] argues that classroom language norms can reproduce racialized hierarchies when Black Language is evaluated against standardized norms rather than treated as legitimate in its own right. Charity Hudley and Mallinson^[8] similarly emphasize that linguistic variation must be understood as central to educational equity and that teachers benefit from explicit preparation for working with linguistic diversity in classrooms. Recent work has further emphasized the importance of creating educational spaces that explicitly recognize and validate diverse linguistic practices in higher education contexts^[13]. Research in this area highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that move beyond deficit views of nonstandard varieties and instead recognize them as legitimate and rule-

governed systems.

Related scholarship in dialect awareness and critical language pedagogy has shown that explicit engagement with language variation can reshape student and teacher attitudes. Wolfram^[10] argues that dialect awareness programs can challenge misconceptions about linguistic diversity by demonstrating the systematic nature of variation. Similarly, Godley et al.^[9] and Godley and Minnici^[14] show that classroom discussions of dialect, language prejudice, and linguistic power can support more critical and reflective understandings of language. Together, this work establishes that making variation visible and discussable is an effective means of challenging prescriptive assumptions and promoting more socially informed perspectives on language.

A second relevant body of scholarship concerns beliefs about grammar instruction and the role of linguistic knowledge in education. Research in applied linguistics has shown that attitudes toward grammar teaching are often more complex than a simple opposition between explicit and implicit instruction. Burgess and Etherington^[15] found that teachers continue to value grammar instruction while also holding nuanced views about how it should be taught. Barnard and Scampton^[16], building on this work, similarly found that teachers' beliefs often combine support for formal instruction with attention to communicative context and learner needs. Bäckström^[17] further demonstrates that individuals frequently hold both prescriptive and descriptive orientations simultaneously, suggesting that language attitudes are often hybrid rather than categorical.

Work in English education has also emphasized the importance of teachers' linguistic knowledge and its relationship to instruction. Andrews^[18] argues that teachers' explicit knowledge about language plays a key role in shaping classroom practice, while Hudson^[19] makes a broader case for the inclusion of linguistics in school curricula as a way of improving language awareness and teaching effectiveness. Myhill^[20] and Myhill and Watson^[21] likewise demonstrate that grammar instruction is most effective when embedded in meaningful writing contexts rather than taught as isolated rules. Together, these studies suggest that grammar pedagogy is most productive when it integrates linguistic understanding with attention to context, communication, and student meaning-making.

Recent work has also examined how institutional frame-

works, such as curriculum standards, reflect and reinforce particular approaches to grammar and language. Dill and O'Neil^[22], for example, found that state-level English language arts standards continue to privilege rule-based, prescriptive approaches to grammar instruction, with limited integration of linguistic perspectives on variation and context. This suggests that even as research in linguistics and education has moved toward more flexible and descriptive understandings of language, institutional practices may continue to reinforce more traditional models of correctness.

Taken together, these strands of research suggest two key points. First, beliefs about language and grammar are deeply shaped by ideological frameworks that privilege standardization and correctness. Second, those beliefs can be influenced through pedagogical approaches that foreground linguistic diversity, context, and social meaning. Much of this work, however, has focused on sociolinguistic approaches to language teaching, particularly those that address present-day variation and linguistic prejudice directly.

Less attention has been given to the potential role of historical linguistics in shaping language attitudes. Although there is growing interest in the teaching of the history of English^[23], this work has focused primarily on course design and instructional approaches rather than on systematic changes in student beliefs about language. At the same time, historical linguistic research has long engaged with questions of variation, contact, and language ideology. For example, O'Neil^[24] demonstrates that debates surrounding the Middle English creolization hypothesis are deeply intertwined with ideological assumptions about language legitimacy and change, highlighting the extent to which historical interpretation and language ideology are mutually informing.

This gap is significant because a diachronic approach offers a distinct way of engaging with language ideology. Whereas sociolinguistic pedagogy often foregrounds present-day variation directly, diachronic study reveals that standardness itself is historically contingent, emerging through processes such as sound change, borrowing, contact, and standardization. A historical perspective may therefore not only complement sociolinguistic approaches but also provide a powerful framework for rethinking assumptions about correctness and variation at a more fundamental level. The present study addresses this gap by examining how a linguistically oriented History of the English Language course

influences student attitudes toward grammar, language variation, and the prescriptivism–descriptivism debate. In doing so, it extends existing research on language attitudes by demonstrating the potential of diachronic study to reshape how students understand language, complementing and expanding upon sociolinguistic approaches to language pedagogy.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

There were 20 total participants in this study. Of these, 12 were English Teaching majors, 7 were English majors from different areas (Literature, Creative Writing, and Professional Writing), and 1 student was majoring in Elementary Education. One English Teaching major was also double majoring in Spanish Teaching. Three participants reported having taken a prior introductory linguistics course, and all participants reported at least some foreign language experience. At the high end, one participant was pursuing a language-related double major in Spanish Teaching; 5 participants reported some university-level foreign language study, and 14 participants reported only high school foreign language experience. Responses were sometimes accompanied by parenthetical comments such as “high school Spanish (hated),” “high school Spanish (brief),” and “2 years high school Spanish (frustrating).” Taken together, these responses suggest generally limited prior experience with language study and linguistics among participants. Although the study did not include a control group, the relatively limited linguistic background of participants reduces the likelihood that prior coursework in linguistics or sociolinguistics substantially influenced the findings.

Data were gathered during class time, but participation in this study was not mandatory. The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRBNet ID: 1777539-1), and all participants signed an Informed Consent Document that described the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, and confidentiality of the study.

3.2. History of English Course

The study was conducted in a 400-level undergraduate History of the English Language course at a public U.S.

university. The course met three times per week for 50 min and examined the development of English from its earliest recorded forms to the present. Major topics included historical linguistics, language change, standardization, dialect variation, and global Englishes. Students studied the Indo-European and Germanic language families, Old and Middle English, sound change (including Grimm’s Law and the Great Vowel Shift), phonetic transcription, the spread of English, and creolization. The course also addressed the social and political dimensions of language, including the historical development of Standard English and prescriptivism. Most class sessions combined assigned readings, lecture, skills practice, and small-group discussion focused on open-ended questions related to the day’s topic. Assessments included three exams and a final reflective project consisting of a presentation and paper on a topic of the student’s choice. Most readings were assigned from Smith and Kim’s^[25] *This Language, a River: A History of English*.

3.3. Questionnaire

Student attitudes toward language, grammar, and instruction were measured using a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire administered at the beginning and end of a semester-long History of English course. The survey employed a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items were designed to capture orientations toward prescriptivism and descriptivism, beliefs about language variation and change, and attitudes toward grammar instruction.

Survey items were adapted from prior research on language attitudes and grammar instruction. Items addressing prescriptivism and descriptivism were informed by Bäckström’s^[17] study of language attitudes, while items related to grammar instruction were adapted from Barnard and Scampton^[16], whose instrument was based on Burgess and Etherington’s^[15] survey of teacher beliefs about grammar instruction. Items were modified as needed to reflect the context of a historically oriented linguistics course. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A focused on general beliefs about language, including the status of Standard English, the validity of dialect variation, and attitudes toward language change (e.g., “All varieties/dialects of English are just as valid as Standard English”; “Language change is natural and should not cause concern”). Section B addressed beliefs about grammar instruction and pedagogical practices (e.g., “Students

learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use”; “Teachers should only correct grammatical errors that interfere with communication”). The full text for the 20 items in the questionnaire may be found in Section 4.1.

Although Likert-scale data are ordinal, mean scores are reported here as a common and practical method for identifying overall trends in attitudinal data. Responses were coded numerically (0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) to allow for comparison of pre- and post-course responses.

3.4. Written Reflections

Following the post-course administration of the questionnaire, students completed a written reflection in which they compared their pre- and post-course responses. The prompt invited students to identify which attitudes had changed, which had remained stable, and to explain the factors that influenced their thinking. Students were also encouraged to reflect on specific course content or experiences that contributed to any shifts in perspective. These reflections provided insight into how students interpreted their own attitudinal development over the course of the semester.

3.5. Group Discussions

After completing the questionnaire and written reflection, students participated in small-group discussions (approximately 15 min long) designed to further explore their attitudes toward language and grammar. The discussions were semi-structured, guided by prompts that encouraged students to reflect on changes in their views, the role of course content in shaping those views, and their beliefs about grammar instruction, standard language, and language variation. Students were also invited to discuss the validity of nonstan-

dard varieties, the role of language change, and appropriate approaches to teaching grammar. While guiding questions were provided, conversations were intentionally open-ended to allow for the emergence of themes not explicitly anticipated by the prompts. These discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

3.6. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during the first week of the semester and again during the final week of the course. Written reflections and group discussions were conducted immediately following the post-course survey. This sequencing allowed students to first register attitudinal changes quantitatively, then reflect on those changes individually, and finally engage in collaborative discussion. Together, these stages provided multiple perspectives on student learning and attitudinal development over time.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Data

Pre- and post-course questionnaire data reveal meaningful shifts in student attitudes toward language, grammar, and instruction over the duration of the course. Overall, the results indicate movement toward more descriptivist and variation-affirming perspectives, along with greater acceptance of language change and less support for rigid prescriptivist positions. At the same time, students did not reject standard language or explicit grammar teaching altogether, suggesting the emergence of a more nuanced, context-sensitive view. Pre- and post-course averages for each survey item are presented in **Table 1**. These results should be interpreted as descriptive trends rather than inferential statistical findings.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items with Pre-Course and Post-Course Results.

Item No.	Item Text	Pre-Course Mean	Post-Course Mean
A1	All English-speaking countries should aim for the same standard variety, vocabulary, and word-order.	2.05	1.5
A2	All varieties/dialects of English are just as valid as Standard English (i.e., the variety taught in schools).	2.65	3.25
A3	It is important to be able to speak, write, and read English using the standard variety.	2.65	2.9
A4	The study of language should include more than rules about how people should speak; it should also describe ways of speaking that aren't necessarily considered proper.	2.4	3.25
A5	Grammatical correctness in written English is not important.	1.4	1.65
A6	Spelling and grammar rules given in dictionaries should be strictly followed.	2.1	1.6
A7	Incorrect language use contributes to the decay of language and should therefore be avoided.	1.15	0.75

Table 1. *Cont.*

Item No.	Item Text	Pre-Course Mean	Post-Course Mean
A8	I believe in a descriptive attitude towards language (definition of “descriptive”: to describe a language without being critical or expressing judgment).	2.55	3
A9	I believe in a prescriptive attitude towards language (definition of “prescriptive”: to enforce linguistic norms and help people understand how to follow grammatical rules).	2	1.65
A10	Language change (including changes in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar) is natural and should not cause concern.	2.8	3.55
B1	Students learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.	2.5	3.25
B2	Formal instruction helps learners to produce grammatically correct language.	2.8	3.2
B3	Student use of language involves conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and how it works.	2.4	2.35
B4	Students need a conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve their language.	2.6	2.4
B5	Decontextualized, isolated practice of grammatical structures has a place in language learning.	2.75	2.8
B6	Grammar is best taught through work which focuses on message and communication.	2.75	2.95
B7	Teachers should only correct grammatical errors that interfere with communication.	2.05	2.8
B8	Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.	2.75	3.25
B9	When teaching or correcting grammar, teachers should avoid expressing judgment and being critical.	2.55	3.45
B10	The approach to grammatical instruction in schools should be norm-enforcing, meaning there is a standard for correctness that students should follow.	2.25	2.05

The strongest changes appeared in items related to language diversity, description, and language change. Students showed increased agreement with the claim that all varieties and dialects of English are as valid as Standard English (A2: 2.65 → 3.25), as well as with the view that the study of language should include description of forms that are not necessarily considered proper (A4: 2.4 → 3.25). Agreement also increased for identifying with a descriptive attitude toward language (A8: 2.55 → 3.0) and for the statement that language change is natural and should not cause concern (A10: 2.8 → 3.55). Together, these shifts suggest that students increasingly understood English as a historically evolving and variable system rather than a fixed set of correct forms.

At the same time, students moved away from several explicitly prescriptivist beliefs. Agreement decreased for the idea that all English-speaking countries should aim for a single standard variety (A1: 2.05 → 1.5), for the view that spelling and grammar rules should be strictly followed (A6: 2.1 → 1.6), and for the claim that incorrect language use contributes to language decay (A7: 1.15 → 0.75). Students also showed somewhat reduced agreement with identifying with a prescriptive attitude toward language (A9: 2.0 → 1.65). These changes point to a broad weakening of rigid norm-based attitudes.

Despite these shifts, students did not abandon standard language values altogether. In fact, agreement increased somewhat for the statement that it is important to be able to speak, write, and read English using the standard vari-

ety (A3: 2.65 → 2.9). This pattern suggests that students were not simply replacing one extreme with another. Rather, they appear to have developed a more differentiated perspective in which nonstandard varieties are recognized as valid, even while Standard English remains important in particular institutional or academic contexts.

The questionnaire also showed notable changes in beliefs about grammar teaching. Students became more favorable toward the idea that grammar is learned through exposure to language in natural use (B1: 2.5 → 3.25), and they also expressed stronger agreement that formal instruction helps learners produce grammatically correct language (B2: 2.8 → 3.2). Agreement increased as well for communication-focused instruction (B6: 2.75 → 2.95), for correcting only those grammatical errors that interfere with communication (B7: 2.05 → 2.8), for the helpfulness of explicit discussion of grammar rules (B8: 2.75 → 3.25), and for avoiding judgment or criticism when teaching grammar (B9: 2.55 → 3.45).

Other instructional items changed only minimally. Beliefs about conscious grammatical knowledge (B3: 2.4 → 2.35; B4: 2.6 → 2.4) and decontextualized practice (B5: 2.75 → 2.8) remained relatively stable. Agreement with norm-enforcing grammar instruction (B10: 2.25 → 2.05) declined slightly rather than increasing. Considered together, these results suggest that students moved toward a less punitive and more flexible view of grammar teaching while still valuing explicit instruction and grammatical knowledge.

Overall, the quantitative findings support the conclu-

sion that the course encouraged students to see English as historically changing, internally diverse, and socially situated. At the same time, the results also indicate that students retained a place for standard language and formal grammar instruction, especially in educational contexts, pointing to the development of a more nuanced rather than wholly oppositional stance.

4.2. Qualitative Results

Themes were identified through analysis of both students' written reflections and the small-group discussion transcripts. These qualitative data show that the attitudinal changes reflected in the survey were not merely individual shifts in opinion but part of a broader rethinking of language as historically changing, socially situated, and context dependent. Across both data sources, students repeatedly moved away from rigid correctness-based views of English and toward more flexible, historically informed perspectives, while still preserving a place for standard language in particular institutional settings.

A central theme across both the essays and the discussion groups was the growing recognition that there is no single legitimate form of English. Many students described moving away from the assumption that one standard should govern all speakers and toward the view that dialectal and global variation are valid in their own right. In essays, students often framed this shift explicitly, noting that "there shouldn't be some universal 'one size fits all' standard" for English. In the discussions, this perspective emerged collaboratively, with participants affirming that nonstandard varieties "shouldn't be punished" and instead reflect "where you grew up" and "your culture...who you are."

Students also connected this recognition of variation to specific course content. One participant described initially thinking English should follow a single standard, but after exposure to varieties such as Singlish, came to see that "English can be anything anyone wants it to be." Others emphasized that once linguistic structure was understood, forms that previously seemed incorrect were revealed to be systematic. This movement—from perceiving difference as error to perceiving it as patterned variation—strongly reinforces the quantitative shift toward agreement that all varieties of English are valid.

Across both essays and discussions, students consis-

tently identified the historical study of English as the primary driver of their changing attitudes. Many described coming to see language not as a fixed system but as one that is continually evolving. In the discussions, this realization often emerged through collaborative reasoning: after tracing the development of English across historical stages, students concluded that change is inevitable. As one participant explained, once you see how English has changed over time, "it's really not a big deal... it's gonna happen again," a sentiment echoed by others who described language as "always moving and always changing."

Students also applied this diachronic perspective to contemporary language use. In discussing texting and social media, participants reframed linguistic innovation as part of an ongoing historical process rather than as decline. One student remarked that "we're going through a language change right now because of social media," while others noted how rapidly conventions shift even within a single generation. These observations suggest that the course enabled students to situate present-day language practices within a broader historical trajectory, reinforcing acceptance of change.

Discussion data further show that formal historical-linguistic content played a key role in this shift. Students referenced Old English, the Great Vowel Shift, and spelling variation as moments that destabilized their assumptions about correctness. One participant noted that seeing multiple historical spellings for the same word made them newly appreciate both the contingency of current standards and the processes that produced them. Together, these reflections indicate that diachronic study did not simply provide background knowledge; it actively reshaped students' understanding of what language is.

A third major theme involves a shift from judgment toward social awareness. In both essays and discussions, students described moving away from evaluating language in terms of correctness and toward recognizing the social dimensions of language use. Several participants explicitly connected prescriptive norms to inequality. In one discussion, students characterized prescriptivism as "classist," arguing that rigid standards can disadvantage those who lack access to particular forms of linguistic capital.

Students also reflected on how their own attitudes had changed. One participant described previously being bothered by nonstandard forms used by family members, but later

coming to see such usage as simply part of a dialect: “as long as you got it across, I don’t care.” Others emphasized that learning about structured variation, particularly in varieties such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), challenged assumptions that nonstandard speech is random or incorrect. As one student noted, understanding that these varieties have their own rules made them reconsider earlier judgments.

These reflections suggest that students were not only learning about linguistic diversity but also developing a more critical awareness of the social consequences of language ideologies. This shift aligns with the quantitative decrease in agreement with prescriptivist statements and the increased endorsement of nonjudgmental approaches to language use.

Despite strong movement toward descriptivist thinking, students consistently articulated a nuanced, context-dependent view of language. Rather than rejecting standard language, many emphasized its continued importance in specific contexts while simultaneously affirming the validity of other varieties. This perspective was particularly visible in the discussion groups, where students frequently framed language use in terms of audience and situation. For example, participants noted that “texting you have one kind of language, but then email you have another,” and described consciously shifting their speech in professional settings.

Students often framed this flexibility in terms of code-switching. One participant explained that “how I speak and how I write are two different things,” while another described adjusting their speech for interviews or formal contexts. This awareness extended to teaching: several students expressed a desire to teach Standard English while also explicitly validating students’ home dialects.

In some cases, students explicitly embraced both descriptivist and prescriptivist orientations. One participant described leaving the course “more of a descriptivist and more of a prescriptivist,” arguing that students should learn standard conventions while also recognizing that “the way you talk at home is just as valid.” Another noted that prescriptivism may be useful for “official communication” but problematic when used to evaluate people socially. These responses closely mirror the quantitative finding that support for Standard English persisted even as descriptivist attitudes increased.

Finally, students described significant changes in how they think grammar should be taught. Across both essays

and discussions, participants expressed decreased support for isolated, rule-heavy instruction and increased support for approaches grounded in communication and context. In the discussions, students frequently criticized textbook-based grammar teaching, describing it as ineffective and disconnected from actual language use. One participant stated that “if you just read it out of a textbook... you’re not gonna learn,” advocating instead for applying grammar concepts within meaningful contexts such as literature or writing.

Students also proposed more flexible instructional strategies, including short, embedded lessons and opportunities to apply grammar in authentic tasks. At the same time, they did not dismiss grammar instruction altogether. Many emphasized that grammar remains important, particularly in academic writing, but argued that instruction should prioritize clarity and communication over strict adherence to rules. As one student explained, errors should matter primarily when they “interfere with communication.”

Importantly, students also expressed a desire to make grammar instruction more inclusive. Several suggested explicitly acknowledging different dialects in the classroom to validate students’ linguistic backgrounds. One participant described incorporating references to varieties such as AAVE so that students could see their own language practices reflected and legitimized in instruction.

Taken together, the essays and discussion transcripts suggest that the course did more than shift attitudes in a general sense. It helped students reconceptualize English as multiple rather than singular, changing rather than fixed, and socially meaningful rather than simply correct or incorrect. A central insight emerging across both forms of qualitative data is that students came to recognize there is, in fact, no single English. Crucially, they arrived at this insight not only through exposure to linguistic diversity, but through a diachronic understanding of how English has changed over time.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how a linguistically oriented History of the English Language course influences student attitudes toward grammar, language variation, and the prescriptivism–descriptivism debate. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that students

did not simply move from one position to another; rather, they developed a more complex, historically grounded, and context-sensitive understanding of language. Central to this shift is the recognition that there is, in fact, no single English. Instead, students came to view English as internally diverse, historically evolving, and socially situated, while still acknowledging the contextual usefulness of standardized forms.

5.1. Diachronic Knowledge as a Catalyst for Attitudinal Change

One of the most significant findings of this study is that students consistently attributed their changing attitudes to their exposure to the historical development of English. While previous research has emphasized the role of sociolinguistic instruction in reshaping beliefs about language^[9,10], the present study suggests that diachronic knowledge may play an equally powerful role. By encountering earlier stages of English and examining processes such as sound change, standardization, and language contact, students were able to see that linguistic forms and conventions are not fixed but emerge through historical processes.

This finding extends prior work on language ideology by demonstrating that historical evidence can destabilize assumptions about correctness at a fundamental level. As Milroy^[5] argues, standard language ideology depends in part on the perception of uniformity and stability; by contrast, a diachronic perspective reveals instability, variation, and change as inherent features of language. Similarly, Lippi-Green's^[4] critique of the "standard language myth" emphasizes that beliefs about correctness are socially constructed. The present study suggests that historical linguistics provides a particularly effective means of making this construction visible, allowing students not only to recognize variation but to understand it as a necessary and recurring feature of language.

This connection between historical analysis and language ideology is also reflected in prior work on English language history. O'Neil^[24], for example, shows that debates about the origins and development of English are closely tied to ideological assumptions about legitimacy and variation. The findings of the present study suggest that when students are exposed to these historical processes directly, they are more likely to reinterpret contemporary variation as system-

atic rather than erroneous. In this way, diachronic study functions not only as content knowledge but as a mechanism for reshaping how students conceptualize language itself. This aligns with recent developments in history-of-English pedagogy, which increasingly emphasize multiple Englishes, variation, and the social dimensions of language change^[26].

5.2. From Standard Language Ideology to Contextual Language Awareness

A second key finding is that students moved away from rigid, correctness-based views of language and toward a more context-dependent model of language use. This shift aligns with research on standard language ideology, which has shown that dominant language norms are often treated as neutral or universal despite their social and historical origins^[5,11]. In the present study, students increasingly rejected the idea that a single standard should govern all language use, instead emphasizing variation, audience, and communicative context.

At the same time, students did not reject Standard English altogether. Rather, they reframed it as one variety among many, useful in specific institutional contexts such as academic writing or professional communication. This finding is consistent with Lippi-Green's^[4] argument that standard language ideology operates most powerfully when it is treated as natural and unquestioned. By contrast, students in this study began to treat the standard as contingent and context-bound rather than inherently superior.

The qualitative data further suggest that this shift was accompanied by increased awareness of the social dimensions of language. Students explicitly identified prescriptive norms as potentially exclusionary, echoing broader concerns in the literature about the relationship between language, power, and inequality^[7,8,27]. In this sense, the course appears to have fostered not only descriptive awareness of variation but also critical awareness of the social consequences of language ideologies.

5.3. Hybrid Language Beliefs and the Persistence of Grammar Instruction

Despite clear movement toward descriptivist orientations, the findings also highlight the persistence of hybrid beliefs about language. Students frequently endorsed both

descriptive and prescriptive perspectives, a pattern that aligns with previous research suggesting that language attitudes are often mixed rather than categorical^[17]. Quantitative results showed continued support for the importance of Standard English and explicit grammar instruction, even as acceptance of variation increased. That is, these students retained a functional or contextual prescriptivism.

This hybrid stance is also consistent with research on grammar pedagogy. Studies have shown that teachers and learners often value both explicit instruction and communicative approaches, rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive^[15,16]. Similarly, work in English education suggests that grammar instruction is most effective when integrated into meaningful contexts rather than taught as isolated rules^[20]. The students in this study appear to be moving toward precisely this kind of integrated perspective, in which grammar is understood as both a tool for communication and a resource for navigating different linguistic contexts.

Rather than viewing this hybridity as inconsistency, it is more productive to interpret it as evidence of developing linguistic awareness. Students were not abandoning standards, but reinterpreting them as contextually bounded and socially situated. This aligns with arguments that linguistic competence involves the ability to move flexibly across varieties and contexts, rather than adherence to a single, fixed norm.

5.4. Implications for Grammar Instruction and Educational Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for grammar instruction and teacher education. Students consistently moved away from viewing grammar as the enforcement of rules and toward seeing it as a tool for communication, awareness, and rhetorical effectiveness. They expressed support for approaches that emphasize meaning, context, and audience, as well as for limiting correction to instances where communication is affected.

At the same time, students maintained that knowledge of standard conventions remains important, particularly in academic and professional contexts. This suggests that effective grammar instruction may require balancing two goals: providing access to dominant linguistic norms while also validating and building on students' existing linguistic resources. This balance is central to current work in linguistics and education, which emphasizes the importance of linguis-

tic awareness, critical language awareness, and equity in teacher preparation^[8,19,28].

Importantly, these findings also highlight a potential disconnect between student learning and institutional frameworks. As Dill and O'Neil^[22] demonstrate, educational standards continue to privilege rule-based, prescriptive approaches to grammar. The present study suggests that linguistically informed instruction—particularly through a diachronic lens—can challenge these assumptions and support more flexible and inclusive approaches to language teaching. In this way, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about how linguistics can inform educational practice and how classroom instruction might better reflect contemporary understandings of language.

The qualitative findings also provide insight into which aspects of the course students found most influential in reshaping their perspectives. Across reflections and group discussions, students repeatedly pointed to historical examples of language change as important in challenging assumptions that English is fixed or inherently uniform. In particular, they noted changes in grammar, pronunciation, and standardization. Several participants specifically referenced topics such as the Great Vowel Shift, the historical decline of forms such as *whom*, and the influence of language contact and creolization in helping them reconsider rigid notions of correctness. Discussions of global Englishes, dialect diversity, and linguistic prejudice also appeared especially influential, particularly when students connected historical processes to contemporary debates about language use and legitimacy. Moreover, the course was designed so that students were required to engage critically with these topics on a regular basis. Strategies such as “think-pair-share”^[29,30] were used to ensure all students participated during every class session.

Beyond its implications for students' language attitudes, the present study also suggests that university courses in the history of the English language may contribute to the development of professional linguistic awareness among future English teachers. Rather than simply replacing prescriptive beliefs with descriptivist ones, participants demonstrated an increasing ability to evaluate language in relation to audience, purpose, historical development, and social context. This form of disciplinary judgment has become an increasingly important goal within English teacher education, where scholars have argued that effective teachers require not only knowl-

edge of language structure but also the capacity to engage critically with language variation, linguistic diversity, and the social consequences of language ideologies^[27,28,31–33]. From this perspective, the value of historical linguistics extends beyond content knowledge. By situating contemporary debates about grammar and Standard English within broader historical processes, history of English courses may help prepare future teachers to make more informed, equitable, and context-sensitive instructional decisions.

5.5. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single course at one institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, while the mixed-methods design provides a detailed account of attitudinal change, the study does not examine whether these changes persist over time or influence students' future teaching practices. Finally, because the instructor also served as the researcher, participants may have been influenced by perceived expectations regarding language attitudes despite efforts to encourage open-ended reflection.

Future research might explore how diachronic approaches compare with explicitly sociolinguistic interventions in shaping language attitudes, or how the two might be combined in teacher education contexts. Longitudinal studies could examine whether the hybrid perspectives observed here translate into classroom practice, particularly among students who go on to become teachers. Further work might also investigate which specific elements of a history of English course—such as phonological change, language contact, or standardization—are most influential in reshaping student beliefs.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined how a linguistically oriented History of the English Language course influences student attitudes toward grammar, variation, and the prescriptivism–descriptivism debate. Across both quantitative and qualitative data, students demonstrated a consistent shift toward more flexible, historically informed understandings of language. Central to this shift was the recognition that English is not a single, fixed system but a dynamic and internally

diverse set of practices shaped by historical change and social context. Importantly, students did not simply abandon prescriptive perspectives. Instead, they developed more nuanced, context-dependent views in which Standard English remains useful in certain settings while other varieties are understood as equally valid. This hybrid orientation reflects a growing awareness of language as both a social and communicative resource, rather than merely a system of rules to be enforced.

These findings suggest that diachronic study can play a meaningful role in reshaping language attitudes, complementing existing sociolinguistic approaches to language pedagogy. By making visible the historical processes that underlie contemporary norms, a History of the English Language course can help students move beyond rigid notions of correctness toward more informed, adaptable, and socially aware understandings of language. For English teachers, this perspective supports approaches to grammar instruction that emphasize context, audience, and communication, while still providing students with access to Standard English in appropriate settings. Such an approach is particularly important in teacher education, where future teachers must be prepared to address language variation in ways that are both academically rigorous and socially responsive. Ultimately, the findings of this study reinforce a central insight: there is no single English. Recognizing this not only deepens students' understanding of language but also provides a foundation for more flexible, inclusive, and effective approaches to English teaching.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern Indiana (IRBNet ID: 1777539-1).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations related to student participants. De-identified data may be made available by the author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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