Can You Read This? Helping English Language Learners in All Courses

On the conference website I posted the first couple of paragraphs of an essay submitted in my Introduction to Academic Writing Course at Holy Cross, by a student we all called "Mr. Shanghai" because, on the first day of class, as we were sharing our various language competencies, he got into a heated discussion with the three other Chinese students, insisting that he did not speak Mandarin but rather, Shanghainese. He was very proud of his home dialect!

Can you read his paper? Colleagues at Holy Cross have told me that they absolutely cannot read it. But I suspect they were just put off by the high number of errors. Their eyes bounced off the pages and they were dismayed at the thought of having to respond to this writing. I want to suggest some useful strategies for doing so.

I adapted the assignment from a first-year composition textbook I like, called *They Say / I Say*. It provides strategies for folding the ideas and words of others into one's own writing, and it also provides groups of readings on single topics, so that students can, in effect, hunt in an enclosed park. In other words, they do not have to do research to come up with sources to incorporate in their writing. They simply must use the sources provided in the book.

Especially if you are teaching an introductory-level course, you might consider providing such an “enclosed park” as a first assignment, even if you want students to do independent research later. Doing so allows them to concentrate on the intellectual task of attending to arguments in your field. This is especially helpful to English language learners since they will probably need twice as much time to complete the readings as native English speakers do.

So, my student was asked to frame a thesis in response to the question “Is the American Dream over?” He had to use at least three sources from the textbook, and he was invited to use whatever else he knew that was relevant to the topic. The primary intellectual task was to manage a complex argument that put his own views in conversation with those of others. He does incorporate some of the readings, for instance in his opening paragraph and at the bottom of p. 2. He also puts his own knowledge of American history into the paper—Mr. Shanghai was an ardent student of American history and a political science major at Holy Cross. I’ll bet you he was the only student in that class who had any idea what the Lowell Experiment was! (The assignment did not require him to document these references.)

In responding to this paper, I would want to emphasize what my student has done right. I would praise him for incorporating the readings and his own knowledge of history. I would praise his content-based transitions. My main criticism of the paper would be that he does not get his complete thesis onto the first page, and preferably into the first paragraph, of this five-page paper. His thesis is that the American Dream has been realized on what he calls the “spiritual level,” but not on the “material level.” The problem is that we don’t hear about the material level until near the bottom of the second page.

This criticism focuses on how Mr. Shanghai has performed the assignment’s primary intellectual task. He has not performed it satisfactorily because he does not let his reader know early enough about all the parts of his thesis. I recommend that no matter how many surface errors you see in a student’s paper, you concentrate your comments on how well he or she has performed the intellectual task that the assignment requires. English language learners are not going to be perfect in English when they enter college, but their higher education cannot wait until they are perfect. While they are working on their English, they must also be working on the academic content they have entered college to learn.

But what about responding to the many errors in this paper? Do I recommend that you ignore them? No I don’t think you should ignore them, although I do think you should realize that you are not the only person responsible for helping an English language learner improve his or her English. You will point out some errors, and other professors will as well, and over time as the student interacts in an English-immersive environment, progress will happen. You know this from your own language-learning experiences.

So, what errors to point out? Actually, there are not a lot of errors in Mr. Shanghai’s paper. There are a few errors repeated many times. The vast majority of them comprise incorrect use of the articles “the” and “a / an.” Article errors are very common in the English writing of people whose native language is Chinese. Such errors diminish eventually. Since after all, it was a first-year composition course, I did correct them on one page of this paper. But if you are teaching a content area, I don’t think you need to do that.

The key point with any error correction, however, is that you not correct errors as single instances; look for patterns, for a few errors that are repeated, address those, ignore others. I often prepare a separate comment sheet with an explanation of each of these recurring errors. I number the explanations, and then mark each instance of the error with the number. That way, I have to explain it only once, and also the student can easily see which errors recur. In Mr. Shanghai’s paper, I gave this treatment to his “parts of speech” errors—right word stem, wrong part of speech. Examples: in the second paragraph, “The major reason for American people fought against England colonist was that they were taxed without their consent.” Also, in the third paragraph: “Women suffered a lot as labors in the Lowell Experiment.” One more, top of p. 2: “Women also gained suffrage after the implement of the Nineteenth Amendment.” My hope is that explanation of this type of error is transferable.

Mr. Shanghai came to the U.S. for the first time to begin college at Holy Cross, and we have more and more students like him. These English language learners cannot be expected to master source-based academic argument, or to shed what Terri Zawacki calls their “written accents,” by the end of freshman year. But professors often react badly to such accents.

Such faculty resistance fueled a heated argument between two native-Spanish-speaking professors at a Holy Cross workshop. One wanted to encourage students who know Spanish to write their papers in Spanish for her course on Latin American history. The other strongly opposed such an option for fear it would hamper these students’ progress in academic English. The historian wanted to open up her students’ varied language capabilities as learning resources for her class, tacitly acknowledging what linguist Nancy Bou Ayash calls the “statistical but not the cultural norm” in the United States, namely that it is “one of the world’s most culturally and linguistically diverse nations” (147). The other professor felt compelled to defend the bastion of so-called Standard English from pollution by a minority tongue (even though it is her own heritage language), setting up the kind of dynamic analyzed by composition scholar Brice Nordquist, in which “Anglo-American hegemony” maintains its dominance precisely by the invocation of other languages as “sites of linguistic difference for the perpetuation of an illusion of linguistic purity, stasis, and superiority” (49).

Current scholarship on language variation and the teaching of academic writing suggests that both of my warring colleagues support an obsolete view of a language as a discrete, static entity. As Nancy Bou Ayash argues, we should discard the concept of “additive multilingualism,” in which language users are imagined as “shuttling between a variety of linguistic systems that remain static and separate” (133). French literature scholar Claire Kramsch suggests that “the dichotomy between native versus non-native speakers has outlived its use” (23, 27). Why? Because, Kramsch says, we live “at a time of large-scale migrations, cross-national and cross-cultural encounters, and increasing linguistic and pragmatic differences among speakers of the same language” (16).

Composition scholar Suresh Canagarajah argues that we increasingly live in a world of what he calls “plurilinguals” (22 ff). A plurilingual knows more than one language but has varied relationships with the languages she knows: one may be a language she has spoken fluently from birth but never learned to write; another may be a language that has official status in her homeland for public business and for schooling, which she can write well but not speak fluently; and a third may be a language she can comprehend only slightly, having encountered it in pop music and on the Internet. Clearly, we are not talking about “additive multilingualism” here. Increasingly, too, whatever languages comprise the plurilingual’s repertoire, one of them is likely to be some form of English. As plurilingualism becomes the norm, creating much inter-language contact, English ramifies into many varieties (see Horner 2010 “Introduction” 5). Chinese American composition scholar Min-Zhan Lu avers that even students who think they are monolingual in English really are not, because they are immersed in the plurilingual world (291).

Hence a movement is afoot to redirect language instruction. Kramsch advocates discarding the goal of native fluency (which is difficult to define) and seeking instead to produce what she calls “intercultural speakers” who know how to “analyze, reflect upon and interpret foreign cultural phenomena when using the language in contact with foreign nationals” (27-28). Kramsch develops her argument in the context of teaching French to non-native speakers of that language, and she contends that the intercultural speaker may ultimately be able to offer insights into French language and culture that are occulted for the native speaker, thus giving the intercultural speaker a new kind of authority as a user of the language (30). These new attitudes have crystalized in a manifesto published in a highly visible and respected venue in English teaching, authored by four nationally known authorities in the field and publicly endorsed by many more (including me): I refer to “Language Difference in Writing: Towards a Translingual Approach,” by Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur, which appeared in *College English* in 2011. These scholars state, “We call for a new paradigm: a translingual approach” that “sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning” (300).

This whole new trend in academic writing instruction aims, I believe, to rescue students with more than one language, whether they came from abroad or grew up in the U.S. with a non-English home language, from having their writing evaluated only in terms of rigid standards of correctness. Yes, they still need to work on improving their English, but also, we can help them by developing more pedagogical uses of diverse languages and more adaptation to a global linguistic environment in which several languages are always going to be in play. Consider whether any source material in other languages can be incorporated into your course, if it is not there already.

For example, in my fall Montserrat course, a first-year seminar with a literary focus, in which we were going to be reading stories written in English from many countries where it is not the native language, I invited students to lead off our first few class meetings by presenting poems in other languages. If you wanted to do this, I told them, just read it in the original language, read it in translation, and then explain something about its provenance and significance in the country of origin. I wanted to make sure that no one thought English has become the lingua franca because it is more beautiful than other languages. This assignment elicited presentations on poems in French, Italian, Igbo, Japanese, Spanish—and Latin.

This approach to “intercultural linguistic competence” was a primary goal of the education the first Jesuits attempted to obtain for themselves, because they hoped to go global with the Catholic message. Historian John O’Malley S.J. has explained that “the basic impulse behind the new Order was missionary” (“How” 60). In China, for example, as Jonathan Spence has shown, Father Matteo Ricci learned to both speak and write Chinese fluently. Furthermore, the Jesuit value of *cura personalis* requires that we attend to the whole student, and why wouldn’t this agenda include students’ linguistic and cultural identities? Jesuits like Matteo Ricci fostered spiritual development and discernment via the languages and cultures of his interlocutors in India and China. What sort of counter-effect is visited on our translingual students if virtually the only time their non-English language is mentioned is as “interference” in their production of perfect English? In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous collection of essays and poems written in English and several varieties of Spanish, she says this:

> So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. (59)

I submit that no version of *cura personalis* can work unless it takes as its basis the encouragement of student self-worth. If so, then taking a translingual approach to teaching languages, including the academic writing students still need for success in college, is actually a very Jesuit way of proceeding. We should do no less than seek translingual eloquentia perfecta in our increasingly linguistically diverse nation and world.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Ayash, Nancy Bou. "U.S. Translingualism through a Cross-National and Cross-Linguistic Lens." In Horner and Kopelson. In Horner and Kopelson.

Canagarajah, Suresh. "Multilingual Strategies of Negotiating English: From Conversation to Writing." *JAC* 29.1-2 (2009): 17-48.

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst. *They Say / I Say, with Readings*. 3rd edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2015.

Horner, Bruce. "Introduction: From 'English Only' to Cross-Language Relations in Composition." In Horner and Kopelson.

Horner, Bruce and Karen Kopelson, eds. *Reworking English in Rhetoric and Compostion: Language, Locations, Interventions.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, forthcoming.

Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." *College English* 73.3 (2011): 303-21.

Kramsch, Claire. "The Privilege of the Intercultural Speaker." In *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography*. Michael Byram and Michael Fleming, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Lu, Min-Zhan. “Metaphors Matter: Transcultural Literacy.” *JAC* 29: 1-2 (2009): 285-293.

Nordquist, Brice. “English *Only* through Disavowal: Linguistic Violence in Politics and Pedagogy.” In Horner and Kopelson.

O’Malley, John W., S.J. “How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education.” In *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives.* Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J., ed. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

Spence, Jonathan D. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Zawacki, Terri, et al. *Valuing Written Accents: International Voices in the U.S. Academy*. writtenaccents.gmu.edu .