

RETHINKING OUR WORK WITH MULTILINGUAL WRITERS: THE ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY OF LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE WRITING CENTER

Bobbi Olson
Grand View University
bolson@grandview.edu

Just shy of 9 AM on one of the last days of the semester, I raced into the writing center. Waiting for my first writer, I hastily checked my email where the subject line “SOS from June!” jumped out at me. June was a writer I knew well, and she was one of my former students in a writing center studio course for multilingual writers. Reading June’s email, her panic was apparent; she was extremely concerned with how a professor was grading her writing in a particular course. Though she had tried to discuss her concerns with her instructor, her account to me indicated this had been futile: “he said that this class is difficult and he cannot help me any more.”

In this moment of frustration and anxiety, June did what I’ve found many multilingual writers do: she came to the writing center. As an institutional site, the writing center often supports writers like June—both in terms of individualized feedback and attention to their writing, but also in providing a sense of community and belonging within the larger university (which can often feel strange and impersonal, particularly for multilingual writers). But in addition to offering writing instruction and comfort, the writing center has the potential to work towards changing the conditions that cause writers like June to feel displaced in the first place. Because it offers opportunities to converse individually with many writers and, often, faculty across the disciplines, the writing center is in a prime position—as John Trimbur and Bruce Horner argue about the field of composition more broadly—to “... provide crucial opportunities for rethinking writing in the academy and elsewhere: [to provide] spaces and times for students and [tutors] both to rethink what academic work might mean and be” (621).

June and I met later in the day, and she talked about how she knew she couldn’t do what the instructor expected—in this case, produce native-English-speaker-like sentences, with no trace of her accent—but she wondered what then she *could* do. Knowing she had worked to the extent of her abilities and yet extremely worried about her grade in the course and its impact on her GPA, June felt at a loss. In our conversation, it became clear that the odds were not in June’s favor (*Hunger Games*). The

expectations placed upon her were unattainable² given her status as a language learner, and even if she was willing to sacrifice herself in order to subscribe to others’ “standards,” she could not possibly succeed in the manner for which she hoped.

The writing center is a place for the sponsorship of student writers, yet I was disinclined in this moment to play the role of sponsor for June. I knew the rules to the game, and I could give them to June—that is, working together, we could “clean up” her paper so that no trace of her status as a non-native-English speaker remained, which is exactly what her instructor wanted and expected. But the costs of doing so are ones I don’t think we should take lightly. I’m not alone.

Over the last decade or so, momentum has risen for U.S. universities (particularly composition teachers) to adopt a broader, more inclusive view of multilingual writers and their writing. Horner and Trimbur, for instance, have argued against the “tacit language policy of unidirectional English monolingualism” prevalent in composition classrooms throughout the U.S. (594). In 2012, Steven Bailey extended this idea to the writing center context specifically and argues that writing centers need to push back against the “institutional expectation that writing centers should ‘fix’ the English of international ESL students” (1). Rather, Bailey argues—and I agree—we can take a “leadership role” in the writing center when we reconsider and adopt “a more multicultural and multilingual worldview” in our work with multilingual writers (1).

This move not only prompts the academy to be a more inclusive place of *all* of its students, but also, operating from a multilingual worldview makes writing centers (and the institutions in which they operate) more ethical places. At my previous large midwestern university, roughly half of the students who visit the writing center are multilingual writers—both national and international. Judging from my conversations with other writing center practitioners, as well as the frequency in which multilingual writers are addressed in the field’s scholarly conversations via publications and conference presentations, many of us in writing center studies are actively invested in working with this

frequent population of writers and are concerned about doing this work well.

Yet, we need to pay careful attention to what it *means* to do this work well. The experiences we have as a result of our frequent work with multilingual writers and the writing center's position as a point of access in U.S. universities work together to create a critical responsibility for us to consider and re-consider not only what we do and how, but also why, toward what ends, and for whose benefit. We bear, in other words, a critical responsibility for acknowledging the ethical dimensions of our work, particularly given the historical functions writing centers have been made to serve within institutions of higher education as gatekeepers of access and conservators of particular conceptions of academic Englishes. And perhaps even more importantly, we need to consider the ways in which our own privileges and institutional positioning make us susceptible to perpetuating the unequal power distributions in which multilingual writers are frequently embedded. As Bailey reminds us, we need to attend to the ways in which "we might be complicit in the maintenance of monocultural and monolingual power structures" in the writing center (1).

If we look at previous scholarship in writing center studies (see Bailey for a recent review of tutor handbooks, for instance), we find that often, the focus is on mainstreaming multilingual writers and their texts. In fact, "As they presently operate, writing centers are more often normalizing agents, performing the institutional function of erasing differences" (Grimm xvii). It seems we proceed as if the work of "erasing differences" in multilingual writers' texts, for instance, is value free. The opposite is true. Since "[l]anguage and culture are inextricably interwoven, [...] asking for the use of a different language variety also means donning the cloak of another culture" (Grill 361). While this may be exactly what a multilingual writer wants to do, I think it is a dangerous assumption—yet it is an assumption we nonetheless act upon when we operate under the idea that we must "manage [...] differences, to bring them under control, to make students with differences sound as mainstream as possible" (Grimm xii). If we heed Grimm's warning and work against automatically aiming to mainstream "difference," we instead view difference as a resource to draw from, rather than something that must be eradicated; we treat multilingual writers and our conversations with them not as a to-do list of finding and "correcting" all the "mistakes" that a native-English-speaker's text would not contain, but instead as an opportunity to discuss the rhetorical choices multilingual writers make and the possible consequences of these choices.

It's easy to see, however, how the writing center becomes complicit in functioning as the "gatekeeper of academic literacy" (Geller et al.). Writing center practitioners often feel an institutional pressure to participate in the effort to mainstream "different" sounding/looking texts. Also, we often *feel* a sense of immediacy from sitting next to writers who radiate a sense of distress (as June's email did); in these moments, we want to allay that distress. Yet writing center practitioners' worry about helping multilingual writers succeed in the university as it currently exists may have caused writing center studies to focus too much on the needs of the institution at the expense of the needs of multilingual writers—the individuals and communities with whom we actually work and to whom we are accountable. In providing tips and strategies for helping multilingual writers meet instructors' (monolingual) expectations, for instance, we have failed to help multilingual writers thrive as individuals and writers with agency.

Instead, because of the conflation between institutional expectations and the learning needs of multilingual writers, we have been drawn into the institutional practice of constructing multilingual students as "problems" because of the ways in which they interrupt efficiencies valued within university systems. Harry Denny writes, for instance, that within writing center scholarship and conversations about multilingual writers, there is an "Othering, either explicit or lurking just under the surface. *They* are a problem that requires solving, an irritant and frustration that resists resolution" (119). By constructing multilingual writers as "problems to fix" (Denny 122), we do not acknowledge the realities of our positions as language teachers, nor do we fully attend to the degree to which "language teaching is not a neutral practice but a highly political one" (Norton 7).

Taking up the calls in writing center scholarship to rethink tutor education—particularly in relation to our work with multilingual writers (see Bailey, Blau and Hall, Bokser, Denny, Grimm, Myers, and Nakamaru for examples)—and applying scholarship from composition and TESOL helps us do pedagogical work more effectively, and also to be more politically and ethically responsible in the writing center. Adopting a "translingual approach," for instance, means we "see difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (Horner et al. 303). Enacting this requires a rethinking of our prevailing habit of equating "differences" in language use with "error." We also need to reexamine what we think we know

about multilingual writers and how they use language. Multilingual writers do not have separate compartments for the various languages and discourses they know and use, but rather move between and draw from these languages and discourses. We need to recognize the ways in which multilingual writers are “multicompetent language users,” not “failed native [English] speakers” (Liu 390). A. Suresh Canagarajah suggests embracing these ideas requires the shifts in mindsets seen in Figure 13.

Applying Canagarajah’s conception of a multilingual orientation in the writing center becomes not only a more pedagogically sound approach in that it accounts more fully for how multilingual writers process and compose texts, but it is also a more ethical approach in that it positions multilingual writers as agents of their own learning. Working from within this framework, we recognize that our job as writing center practitioners is not about eliminating any “slips” where differences arise, but instead helping multilingual writers draw from their different discourses and make active decisions about utilizing various features from them⁴. When we adopt a multilingual orientation, we view writers as making distinct choices based on their multilingual status, rather than making “mistakes” because of their multilingual status. This multilingual approach also encourages writers to interlace features of their discourses—not to use one in one situation and another in a different circumstance, but instead, to draw from all discourses at any given time in order to be more “rhetorically creative” (Canagarajah

“Rhetoric” 175). It becomes our job to help multilingual writers do this well.

By having conversations about multiple discourses, tutors and multilingual writers can focus on “communicative strategies—i.e., creative ways to negotiate the norms relevant in diverse contexts” as opposed to focusing on “grammatical rules in a normative and abstract way” (Canagarajah “Place” 593). (The latter approach is often in service of the institution and at the expense of multilingual writers’ identities.) In addition to how these conversations acknowledge the reality of the fluidity of language⁵, these conversations also provide a foundation for a more thorough understanding of how multilingual writers’ home discourses and American academic discourses intersect and diverge from each other. Talking about the rhetorical moves a multilingual writer might make, based on her home language and/or other discourses of which she is a part, in connection to the conventions of the dominant discourse of the academy promotes multilingual writers becoming more fully informed users of *all* of these discourses. Being “proficient in dominant and nondominant Englishes” means “[multilingual writers] are no longer at the mercy of someone else’s definition of English. They can enjoy their language abilities and use those skills to make their own choices” (Grill 366). In short, we foster multilingual writers’ ability to make decisions rather than be circumscribed by others’ decisions.

Figure 1

*Shifts in Rhetorical Perspectives—***Monolingual Orientation**

focus on language/culture
 language = uniform discourse/genre
 repertoire of the language/culture
 texts as homogenous
 writer as passive
 writer as linguistically/culturally conditioned
 writer as coming with uniform identities

Multilingual Orientation

focus on rhetorical context
 language = multiple discourses/genres
 repertoire of the writer
 texts as hybrid
 writer as agentive
 writer as rhetorically creative
 writer as constructing multiple identities

*Pedagogical Implications (what tutors do/see)—***Monolingual Orientation**

deficiency/errors
 focus on rules/conventions
 texts as transparent/objective
 focus on text construction
 written discourse as normative
 writing as constitutive
 texts as static/discrete
 texts as context-dependent
 compartmentalization of literacy traditions
 L₁ or C₁ as a problem
 orality as a hindrance

Multilingual Orientation

choices/options
 focus on strategies
 texts as representational
 focus on rhetorical negotiation
 written discourse as changing
 writing as performative
 texts as fluid
 texts as context-transforming
 accommodation of literacy traditions
 L₁ or C₁ as a resource
 orality as an advantage (“Rhetoric” 175)

In doing this work, we don't want to restrict access for multilingual writers: it's true that we need to help "students who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds" to "become familiar with [the dominant discourse practices in U.S. academic contexts] along with their complexity and varied nature" (Matsuda 196). To do this type of work necessarily means discussing the conventions of American academic Englishes within writing center sessions, such as talking about grammatical "correctness" (including what are traditionally regarded as patterns of "error," but also things like idiomatic word choice). We also need to have conversations about things like the organizational structures American instructors generally expect in student essays. Yet if the discussions stop here, writing center practitioners miss the opportunity to talk with multilingual writers about—and to push against—the social parameters of a language use that multilingual writers feel the repercussions of violating, but which are seldom named.

Thinking of multilingual writers as "rhetorically creative" means that a tutor's job is no longer just about pointing out textual "divergences" from a singular notion of American academic English and then instructing a multilingual writer on how to "fix" that "mistake." A tutor's job rather becomes an effort to engage more consciously with multilingual writers in ways that attend to the realities of the intersections between language, power, and identity, while at the same time conversing with multilingual writers about the fluidity of language. Although we have always already been doing this work, we have not made these ideas explicit. That is, as language teachers, the politics of our work has always been present; we just haven't always acknowledged this fact. What, then, does taking up these ideas of translanguaging, code meshing, multilingual orientation, etc. actually look like in practice? Perhaps most importantly, a more concentrated effort to engage in what Norman Fairclough calls "metalanguage, a language for talking about language" (200) creates a more equitable distribution of power and agency between the multilingual writer and writing center tutor. Discussing with multilingual writers the various reasons behind a question or suggestion about language use—whether it be a grammatical rule or a discussion of the reasons informing the typical American academic essay styles and forms—allows for multilingual writers to make connections between the use of American academic Englishes and the other discourse communities of which they are a part. It also places them at the helm of control. It's important, too, that this metalanguage

be held alongside a conversation that acknowledges that no one discourse is inherently superior, otherwise we go on privileging monolingual, native-English speakers and a discourse implemented to provide advantages for those who fall in that category (despite the reality that the current university populations no longer fits neatly within these parameters).

Although sometimes it may be difficult to determine whether a writer made a choice that deviates from a discursive norm or if she made an unintentional mistake as she develops a more full command of a discourse, the great advantage of our work in the writing center is that it is always possible (and necessary, I would argue) to simply ask the writer. It is possible to move beyond instructing the writer how to "correct" the "difference." If a textual variation is the result of a conscious choice, the tutor can ask why the writer made that choice and explain the possible readings of that decision. If a writer has, in fact, made a mistake (for example, the writer wasn't aware of the connotation of a word), the tutor can talk with the writer about that decision so that the writer has an opportunity to learn that language feature. Either way, talk such as this shifts away from an approach that would have the tutor simply tell the multilingual writer how to "correct" her text. This talk also moves away from positioning the multilingual writer as a passive recipient of knowledge.

An approach based on these principles values the multiple discourse knowledge multilingual writers bring with them and helps multilingual writers make connections across discourses. A focus on the fluid nature of "standard" language means multilingual writers not only learn the dominant discourses valued in the U.S. academy, but also come to understand that there are rhetorical moves available to be made by writers to resist or subvert that dominance. Canagarajah proposes that teachers of multilingual writers, in our case tutors, teach "students strategies for rhetorical negotiation so that they can modify, resist, or reorient to the rules in a manner favorable to them" ("Rhetoric" 176). While some may argue that it is not our job to push agendas, I want to point out that we already are when working with multilingual writers in ways that mainstream their texts: this supports and fuels monolingual expectations⁶.

Teaching writers to engage with dominant conventions does not mean, however, teaching them to ignore them. It is naive to argue and advise, for instance, that multilingual writers will experience no meaningful consequences for failing to demonstrate competency in these conventions. But, like Canagarajah and others who believe in the importance

of valuing alternative discourses, world Englishes, code meshing, and other iterations of a more inclusive language policy, I believe it is not enough to simply work with multilingual writers in a way that teaches them how to adopt the dominant discourse of American academic English. Instead, I agree that “we should make students sensitive to the dominant conventions in each rhetorical context,” and “we must also teach them to critically engage with them” (Canagarajah “Rhetoric” 177). In the writing center context, this means having ongoing conversations with tutors and multilingual writers about what it means to erase difference in writing and whose interests doing so serves. By being both transparent and translanguaging, we can help writers recognize and enact their own agency, which is one of the most empowering things we can do in our work with writers.

Thinking about the ethical dimensions of working with multilingual writers becomes increasingly essential, as student populations of multilingual writers in American universities grow. But reconceiving what constitutes “error” and re-conceptualizing writing center practices does not only benefit multilingual writers and others commonly regarded as “diverse.” Examining how writing center practitioners can support student writers in their academic writing while at the same time paying attention to student writers’ lived experiences and the nuances of language teaching benefits *all* student writers. *All* student writers deserve to be heard on their own terms as they try to negotiate and understand the expectations placed on them from without. Although we cannot change the institution overnight, we can help writers exert agency. In doing so, we contribute to developing a world that is more responsive and reflective of its increasingly globalized population.

Notes

¹ Pseudonym

² Carol Severino discloses that it can take “up to seven years” for someone learning/using a second language to write and read at the academic level expected in the university (IV.2.3).

³ When using these tables in tutor education, we discuss what it means to operate from a monolingual orientation as most universities—and by extension, many writing centers—presently do, and how that positions us and multilingual writers (and whether we’re comfortable with that). Then we talk about what embracing a multilingual orientation might look like in practice by examining a text produced by a multilingual writer and role-playing what a tutor’s conversation might sound like when operating from within this framework.

⁴ Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y. Martinez describe this move in this way: “teaching English prescriptively

(“These are rules from various language systems; learn to follow them!”) is replaced with models of instruction for teaching English descriptively (“These are the rules from various language systems; learn to combine them effectively”)” (xxi).

⁵ “Our language, all language, is always changing” (Grill 363).

⁶ I want to be careful here, because I also do not advocate for *demanding* students subvert the dominant discourse. I believe we can/should talk about this possibility, but it is ultimately the writer’s decision for how to use her language.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Steven. “Tutor Handbooks: Heuristic Texts for Negotiating Difference in a Globalized World.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 9.2 (2012): 1-8. Web. <http://praxis.uwc.utexas.edu/index.php/praxis/article/view/50/html>.
- Blau, Susan, and John Hall. “Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students.” *The Writing Center Journal* 23.1 (Fall/Winter 2002): 23-44. Print.
- Bokser, Julie A. “Pedagogies of Belonging: Listening to Students and Peers.” *The Writing Center Journal* 25.1 (2005): 43-60. Print.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued.” *College Composition and Communication* 54.4 (June 2006): 586-619. Print.
- . “A Rhetoric of Shuttling Between Languages.” *Cross Language Relations in Composition*. Eds. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, and Paul Kei Matsuda. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2010. 158-179. Print.
- Denny, Harry C. *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2010. Print.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. 2nd ed. Harlow, England: Longman, 2001. Print.
- Geller, Anne Ellen, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2007. Print.
- Grill, Jennifer. “Whose English Counts? Native Speakers as English Language Learners.” *TESOL Journal* 1.3 (September 2010): 358-367. Print.
- Grimm, Nancy Maloney. *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. Print.
- Horner, Bruce, and John Trimbur. “English Only and U.S. College Composition.” *College Composition and Communication* 53.4 (June 2002): 594-630. Print.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” *College English* 73.3 (January 2011): 303-321. Print.
- Liu, Pei-Hsun Emma. “A Journey of Empowerment: What Does Better English Mean to Me?” *TESOL Journal* 1.3 (September 2010): 389-391. Web.

-
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Living-English Work." *Cross-Language Relations in Composition*. Eds. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, and Paul Kei Matsuda. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2010. 42-56. Print.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "Alternative Discourses: A Synthesis." *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Eds. Christopher Schroeder, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2002. 191-196. Print.
- Myers, Sharon. "Reassessing the 'Proofreading Trap': ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction." *The Writing Center Journal* 24.1 (Fall/Winter 2003): 51-70. Print.
- Nakamaru, Sarah. "Theory In/To Practice: A Tale of Two Multilingual Writers: A Case-Study Approach to Tutor Education." *The Writing Center Journal* 30.2 (2010): 100-123.
- Norton, Bonny. *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2000. Print.
- Severino, Carol. "Serving ESL Students." *The Writing Center Resource Manual*. Ed. Bobbie Bayliss Silk. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003. Web.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti, and Aja Y. Martinez. "Introduction: Code-Meshing as World English." *Code-Meshing as World English*. Eds. Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y Martinez. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2011. xix-xxxi. Print.