

Chapter 9

Embracing Grammatical Diversity Among Multilingual Language Learners Across the Disciplines

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ABSTRACT

The increasing presence of multilingual writers in higher education, particularly in North American educational contexts, makes it difficult for educators to assume that all students write proficiently in standard edited English. Yet, educators still tend to expect students to produce English texts that are highly polished and error free without necessarily providing much instruction or support. This mismatch between reality and expectation is difficult for educators to resolve without sufficient training or expertise. The present chapter offers some guidance by describing various multilingual writers and their language variation and development. The authors then present common ideologies held by educators or proposed by theorists that can prevent multilingual writers from getting necessary language support. The chapter then proffers several suggestions for embracing grammatical diversity and supporting legitimate language development in order to better align teachers' expectations with the reality of grammatical diversity in high education.

INTRODUCTION

Shouldn't students use standard edited English when completing writing assignments for college or university, particularly in the U.S., Canada, and other primarily English speaking countries? Shouldn't students turn in writing that is grammatically accurate, well punctuated, and spelled correctly? For many teachers across the curriculum in higher education, the answer to both questions is an unqualified "Yes." For them, the implicit, and often time explicit, expectation is that students should absolutely produce perfectly edited and error-free prose in standard English when writing for college or university. Even a

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comma out of place or a missing article could reflect a level of unprofessionalism that employers in the “real world” would never tolerate.

At least, that’s how the logic goes. But practitioners and scholars in the fields of composition and second language writing have been questioning the reasonableness of this expectation for years. This is especially true as more and more students in college and university, including multilingual students, do not natively speak or write in a standard, highly polished version of English. Furthermore, because multilingual students are increasingly attending institutes of education in English and bring with them unique language backgrounds and needs, and because of the reality that language development takes time, the antiquated notion that one variety of language is superior to all others needs to be questioned and thoughtfully dismantled.

The present chapter provides some insight into this perspective by describing the nature of multilingual students in higher education along with their linguistic needs. It then examines three influential perspectives on whether grammar should be taught in writing classes and whether grammar errors should be tolerated in student writing. Contrasting multilingual students’ needs with ideologies of language instruction and correctness will highlight areas where pedagogy supports and, more often, fails multilingual students. Updated pedagogical practices for TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and WAC/WID (Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines) instructors will then be offered that encourage improvement in grammatical accuracy while also valuing students’ linguistic diversity and respecting the reality of long-term language development.

BACKGROUND

The question of what standard edited English is, and who uses it, represents a complicated and disputed issue on many levels (see Horner et al., 2011a). On one hand, the term might seem self-explanatory: English is a well-recognized language, it ostensibly has a standard form, and the edited form of this language does not feature errors or mistakes. However, the term is much less obvious when accounting for real and legitimate world English varieties. The English used in the United States of America differs from that used in the United Kingdom compared to the English used in India, Hong Kong, or the Philippines. Work done by Braj Kachru since the 1980s as well as that of Canagarajah, Horner, Trimbur and others (see Canagarajah, 2006; Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Kachru, 1990) highlights the fact that languages are not static and that national, local, and even idiosyncratic varieties exist. Such varieties give rise to valuations of correctness and legitimacy despite the fact that each variety can have a “standard” or at least prestigious form. It should also be noted that even standard forms can be rife with ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction (see Li, 2010). Given all this, the English used in what Kachru (1990) considers to be inner-circle contexts, such as the United States and United Kingdom, is what most writers conceive of as “standard” English, and its edited form, which conforms to prescriptivist rules about prestigious spelling, grammar, usage, and style is considered edited. In this chapter, I adopt this as the definition of standard edited English while simultaneously acknowledging that other varieties including second-language and foreign-language varieties of English have legitimacy as well.

As a word of disclaimer, this chapter does not directly deal with idiosyncratic or regional variations of English used by monolingual speakers. Such language variation includes versions of English in which writers might write with a regional or idiosyncratic “accent” or full-blown dialect that differs from standard edited English but still has its own complete grammatical system. A popular example is that of

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