

Chapter 12

Linguistic Diversity in Freshman Composition Courses: Using Students' Texts as "The Text" for Your Freshman Composition Course

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ABSTRACT

The author, a college Composition teacher, recognizes that we are living in an ever-changing world. Such change is reflected in colleges and universities around the world. No longer are our college campuses filled with predominantly English-speaking students. Our classrooms have become linguistically and culturally diverse. How do we accommodate this diversity, especially in our Freshman Composition classroom? With students ever-changing, how do we find a Composition text that can keep up with the ever-changing student. In this chapter, the author shares her story of how she changed what she did in her Composition classroom. She shares her student-centered-book-writing pedagogy, in which the students' texts as produced in her classroom over the course of the semester become 'the text' for her Composition class. The author posits by using the students' texts as 'the text' for the course, the material is always relevant, never stale or outdated, and is inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

The world of academia has become increasingly more diverse and multicultural. One need only take a quick look at any online databases to see the number of articles that are written by non-native English speakers. In fact, a few years ago when I enrolled in the Composition & TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Language) program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania to pursue my PhD, I found myself in an educational setting in which I was the minority. It was a little strange, yet an interesting and an enlightening experience. It was during that time that I wrote a poem that captured what I was feeling at that time and in that space:

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8985-4.ch012

“Through Your Eyes, In Your Shoes”

I imagine myself in South Korea, Russia,

Turkey, or Kenya. I imagine; I imagine

I am a fly in the milk of languages.

I am Ralph Ellison’s invisible, (wo)man.

I am invisible, voiceless, powerless.

I am putting on your shoes.

I am tying the laces.

I am walking in your shoes.

I am feeling the pinch.

I, a monolingual native English speaker, found myself amongst a group of students who spoke two different languages; some of them spoke multiple languages, three or more. As a monolingual amongst this group of brilliant multilingual students I felt different. I felt different, voiceless, almost powerless.

Later during that same semester, I attended a pre-conference session in which a group of three students were preparing for a presentation at the upcoming CCCCs (Conference on College Composition and Communication). Most of the people who attended this pre-conference session were teachers who were on leave, pursuing their PhD degree. During this pre-session the presenters asked those in attendance how they identified the L2 students in their classes. I don’t really remember what anyone else said, but I have painful memories of my response. I looked at the presenter, who had broached the question, with a somewhat bemused look. Finally, I said, “Ahh, I don’t have any non-native students in any of my classes.” As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I heard myself mutter, “Wait; that’s not true. I think I do have non-native speaking students. I just never thought of them that way.” I come from a small island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Our population of about 65,000 people is majority black, and includes whites, Portuguese, Caribbean, Asian and African. The demographic of the community college where I teach reflects this population. Bermuda College is the only tertiary institution on the island. The large majority of Bermuda College students come from the various public and private high schools on the island. English is the only language spoken in these schools. While there may be students who speak another language in their homes, in the school system they only speak English, and most of them speak it fluently and without an accent. It was there in that moment, when those students were preparing for their CCCCs presentation, that I suddenly realized that I may have been doing my students a disservice. It was in that moment that I realized that I never acknowledged the other voice of those students in my class who were raised balanced bilingual. I am still conflicted. In not treating my balanced bilingual students differently, was I, in fact, treating them equally, equal to the native-speaking English students in my class? Or, was I, instead, being unfair to these students in not acknowledging their other voice/s?

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