

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal • Vol 14, No 3 (2017)

TUTORING TRANSLINGUAL WRITERS: THE LOGISTICS OF ERROR AND INGENUITY

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The writing center is perfectly positioned to take the lead in institutional responses to the exigencies of translanguaging. Translingual writers—writers who move with variable facility between linguistic and rhetorical expression in two or more languages—present challenges and opportunities for writing center workers. At the core of writing center work with translingual writers is the question of how we can help writers find voice and agency in environments that ostensibly privilege standardization in language use. Translingual writers in the writing center challenge us to push the boundaries of institutional support for writers whose linguistic multiplicity results in innovative, non-traditional discourse.

The emerging reality of translanguaging offers a platform for reconstructing traditional pedagogies in English as a Second Language (ESL). Traditional ESL praxis posits that learners move through stages of interlanguages in a deliberate trajectory from the native language (L1) to the target language (L2), with those stages being structurally distinct language systems (Brown 243). This theory works ideally when learners have had formal education in L1; phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic knowledge of L1 can be adeptly and consciously scaffolded into the L2 linguistic system. However, as increasing numbers of college students come to our institutions with experiential knowledge but no formal instruction in L1, traditional ESL praxis seems limited. Thus, writing center tutors need logistical bearings first, to objectively observe speech and writing structures in translanguaging discourse, and second, to help translanguaging writers recognize, define, understand, and expand the linguistic choices they are making.

Logistics and Practicalities

Debunking the deficit view. Translingual writers frequently approach the center with a sense that their writing marks them as fringe members of the academic community. Instructors who recommend or require that translanguaging writers visit the writing center for tutoring inadvertently reinforce this sense of deficiency. Unfortunately, this extrinsically imposed need to visit the center seems punitive as well. As

writing center workers, we need to recognize affective differences between clients who seek tutoring on their own and those who show up at the center because an instructor has deemed their writing deficient. In tutoring interactions, this distinction takes shape on an attitudinal continuum: at one end is the pole of self-motivated willingness to improve writing by working from established understandings of rhetorical expectations for academic writing tasks; at the other end is the pole of uncertainty and possible confusion caused by the effort to shape linguistic confidence while functioning in a second language system. Translingual writer Alondra Ceballos helps us see how potentially frustrating this process can be:

I have a hard time putting my thoughts in writing. I believe that it has something to do with my bilingualism. Sometimes, I feel that a word can only be expressed in Spanish and cannot translate in English. What I am trying to say often gets lost in translation. . . . I used to think of Spanish and English as a switch. I could either be on Spanish or English. But the switch metaphor no longer applies to me. I may be writing in English but I am thinking in Spanish or a combination of the two. My mind is made up of a jumble of Spanish and English. (Newman, Gonzales, and Ceballos)

This linguistic “jumble” is frequently manifested in the deficiency that translanguaging writers feel as they function in traditional academic spaces. In his “introduce yourself” essay, Carlos, a first-year writer, offers a glimpse into how linguistic multiplicity can lead to general academic insecurity (This excerpt preserves Carlos’ exact wording):

Writing wasn’t really for me, it had too many rules to follow and I really didn’t understand them. In the first day of class I had come into the room that I feared the most. This course was one of my weakest this semester. I had that mentality of thinking negative about my writing and kept saying to myself “How in the world would I pass this class.”

For Carlos, the English classroom becomes ground zero for his sense of deficiency as a translanguaging writer. This expectation of failure creates a negativity that can

stifle our efforts in the center. A writer who fears failure also eschews the risk-taking that results in linguistic and rhetorical growth. In the center, we may not immediately change the attitude of a student like Carlos, but understanding the source of his resistance—the long-established feeling of deficiency—can help us create safe pedagogical methods that will enable him to forge bravely into linguistic ventures.

A starting point in countering the deficit view is the recognition of the supreme effort required to achieve fluency in two languages. Astrid, a student in my first-year writing class, chose to emigrate to America independently as a middle schooler. Eventually, she triangulated the points of academic success, translingualism, and personal goals, as she explained in this excerpt from her introductory first year writing essay:

I didn't know any English and my new teachers didn't know any Spanish, but after my freshman year was almost over I started little by little understanding more English. During my senior year I moved back to Mexico but I never changed school, I had to cross the border every single day to make it to school and it would take me sometimes two hours. Now that I am starting college, I still live in Mexico, and I come and go back every single day. It's hard to cross every day, especially because of Mexico's situation with the insecurity, but my dreams and goals are in the U.S.A and it doesn't matter how difficult it is, I know it's not impossible.

Astrid's story is not unusual in borderlands institutions where a majority of students demonstrate some level of translingualism; but it may be atypical in settings where translingual students are a minority. Astrid's story of actual border crossing, fraught with realities of readjustment, otherness, and persistence, suggests that translingualism is far more than acquisition of a new language: translingualism represents a sustained effort to overcome material obstacles. Astrid writes of crossing the border every day, an experience that spatially places her in a constant transition between nations, culture, experience, and language. Translingual writers, even if they are campus residents, bring that spatial and experiential multiplicity into the center, and we should glean important insights about working with translingual writers from Astrid's story.

In their interactions in the writing center, translingual students may not always share their backstories, but those stories powerfully inform every writing venture; every writing attempt becomes an opportunity for linguistic shortcoming, for academic failure, and for affirmation of the sense of deficiency.

When writing center workers are attuned to the expansiveness of translingualism, tutoring interactions can become opportunities to restructure translingual writers' self-perceptions as members of the academic community. The center becomes a space where the failure and deficiency that characterize other academic spaces can be replaced with the potential for success.

Understanding "error." When we talk about linguistic crossings, we cannot avoid talking about "error" in the traditional ESL view. In the classic article, "The Study of Error," David Bartholomae reiterates the established language learning dictum that error is evidence of linguistic intention, idiosyncratic but not random (255). In the realm of ESL pedagogy, this linguistic idiosyncrasy refers to the uniqueness of the learner's language, where "the rules of the learner's language are peculiar to that individual alone" (Brown 243). When we use the term *idiosyncrasy* to characterize linguistic effort, we celebrate the learner's dexterity in negotiating multiple language systems. In the tutorial environment of the center, this means looking beyond what appears to be erroneous; instead, we need to discover what the writer might be trying to express through translingual innovation.

In working with translingual writers, we should push Bartholomae's assertion a bit further and look at translingual structures as *approximations* that merge dual and sometimes multiple linguistic competencies in structures that objectively can be described as errors, transfers, direct translations, or cross-linguistic influences (Brown 250-258). As writing center workers, we need to admit that we are often unsure of how to proceed when faced with a text that offers evidence of translingual strategies. Indeed, translingual writing can present an interesting variety of apparently aberrant structures, as the opening of this research paper, written by Valeria, a first-year writer, demonstrates (The writer's original wording is preserved):

- (1) A lot of people have a misconception of what marketing is about, they see a banner or a television commercial and they think that is marketing but is just advertising.
- (2) The concept of marketing is making the costumers succeed, selling your idea and everything you make, analyzing the pros and cons of your competition, making what the costumers want their business, is using the marketing mix strategies like place, promotion, product, and price.

I must be honest: when I look at writing like this, I wonder, "Where do I begin?" In our tutoring work, we

do not simply point out errors; we must strive to explain the structure and to move the learner to a higher level of competence and confidence. That's why attempting to understand the provenance and rationale for error is so important in the context of writing center tutoring. For example, in Valeria's piece, *costumers* in sentence 2 could be flagged as a spelling error or as an incorrect word choice. In English, we would pronounce *costumers* (a somewhat unusual construction) as *costume* with an added *-er*. In Spanish, the word *costumers* is pronounced exactly like *customers*. What appears to be an odd error is actually a translingual crossover; it is not likely that a native speaker of English would make this error. In sentence 2, "but is just advertising" represents a typical Spanish-to-English omission of the pronoun because in Spanish, an inflected language, the verb *es* is sufficient to express the English *it is*. Valeria's writing, perhaps on the surface, does not directly reveal significant translingual crossover because the errors are relatively easy to correct with a bit of directive tutoring; however, understanding the rationale behind these errors can help a tutor provide learner-specific guidance which can inform the writer's approach to future writing.

Understanding how and why errors happen is vital to fostering self-reliance in translingual writers. However, sometimes it is a challenge to try to decipher intent in a text that appears filled with errors. An example from first year writer Nano, writing about how he made his career choice, shows how linguistic "noise" created by an abundance of errors can threaten the construction of meaning (The writer's original phrasing is preserved to emphasize errors that indicate intent):

My interest in joining the medical field came after i got ran over on april 20, 2009. Every time i had surgery to save my left leg i saw how much efford everyone in the room was giving to succed. Nurses, surgeons, anesthesiologist, everyone, before the anesesty did its effectt.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the errors in this excerpt show profound linguistic deficiency. In my work at my border institution, writing like Nano's is not a novelty; it is a daily reality. Thus, I can offer logistical strategies for working with writers whose translingualism seems to stretch boundaries of linguistic acceptability. Realistically, we *understand* what Nano is saying because the passage demonstrates a high level of linguistic approximation. In Spanish, that cumbersome "how much effor[t] everyone in the room was giving to succe[e]d" would be much more elegantly phrased through the powerful verb-object construction *hicieron esfuerzo* (they made an effort),

which Nano approximates in structures that apply L1 grammar in an L2 context. The consistent use of lower case "i," is relatively easy to explain. In Spanish, the first-person pronoun *yo* or *mi* is embedded into inflections; the first-person pronoun rarely appears as a distinct word and, when it does, it is not capitalized. Thus, the lower case "i" is not so much an error as an approximation based on linguistic crossover. Analysis of translingual approximations requires tutorial patience, ingenuity, and explication. We can't just say the structure is wrong or, worse, "What are you trying to say?" or "Why are you using this structure?" Instead, we can be proactive and say, "I think I see what you're trying to say here; let's work at recalibrating this sentence so that it says *exactly* what you're trying to say." It is important to show translingual writers that their hybrid structures are meaningful and that their writing is not a linguistic curiosity (Matsuda 482).

Nuances of translation. Translingualism naturally involves varieties of translation from L1 to L2. A simple "rule" for writing center workers is to critically but objectively examine expressions that seem odd or aberrant, perhaps even illogical, such as these examples of false cognates, where words in two languages have similar spellings but different meanings:

- Using *assist* to mean *attend*: in Spanish, *asistir* means attend, so a translingual writer might write about assisting a class instead of attending a class.
- Using *intoxicate* to mean "poisoned," as in "One of the results of deforestation was the intoxication of animals."
- Using *dominate* to mean *master*: a student might write about *dominating* English or *dominating* a game because *dominar* in Spanish means to prevail.
- Using *distressed* to mean unstressed, where the Spanish prefix *des-* (meaning "without") is approximated by conflating the English *dis-* or *de-* to invent a new meaning for *distressed*. In an essay sharing her strategies for reducing stress, a writer explained that she became "distressed" by taking long bubble baths. This specific linguistic innovation does require a bit of translingual expertise; ordinarily, a tutor might simply point out that *distressed* is misused in this context (which, honestly, was my first impulse). But, it is such an aberrant use of the word, that it should trigger some linguistic sleuthing into the rationale for the construction.

- Using *humble* as a translation of *humilde*, which in Spanish means *meek* or *simple*. So a student might write about being brought up in a “humble” home to mean growing up in poverty.

When we are puzzled by a text that appears to be indecipherable, we should discipline ourselves to look beyond the aberrance to try to discover communicative intent. What we should not do as writing center workers is to force students into further otherness by focusing on the wrongness of their linguistic choices. In many cases, we can guess at the meaning, and letting the writer see our effort to construct meaning is a powerful tool in working with translingual writers. From a descriptive perspective, errors of linguistic transitioning are actually quite resourceful approximations. As we tutor a translingual client, we can *describe* what the writer is attempting to do linguistically without proffering prescriptive commentary about the incorrectness or inappropriateness of the structure.

Discovering the writer’s grammar. Sometimes, translingual writing seems overwhelmingly “wrong,” appearing to be riddled with errors of all types, as in this analysis of *Phantom of the Opera* written by Felix, a first-year writer (his original phrasing is preserved, with italics added to emphasize structures that replicate Spanish rhythms):

On this film, the art of music is between a conflict, light vs. darkness fighting to get the love of a beautiful opera singer/chorus girl named Christine Daaé *in where* she will have to decide between the art of darkness that *the* Erik, the phantom, or known by her as her “Angel of Music” offers, or the shelter of light to protect her from the darkness, a shelter Raoul offers her, a man Christine had a romance with when they both *where Childs*.

In Spanish, this would be a lovely, fluid sentence; in English, it veers toward lengthy obfuscation with distracting linguistic errors. In working with translingual students, though, it is crucial that we celebrate the linguistic effort upfront and then step back and recognize apparent error as approximation grounded in transference of Spanish forms into English syntax. In this excerpt, the use of *on* reflects the logical translation of the Spanish preposition *en* (which stretches semantically from our *on* through *in*). Furthermore, this error is perhaps a phonetic conflation of three vowels that sound remarkably similar in Spanish. For a Spanish speaker, the vowels in the Spanish *en* and the English *on* and *in* are almost indistinguishable. Thus, this prepositional error is

actually a linguistic choice based on logically applied semantic and phonetic knowledge.

In where appears to be an illogical structure until we consider the use of the Spanish *donde*, a conjunction that can be used to explain a cause and effect relationship, which is what the writer is trying to do in this construction. Finally, *childs* seems a gross error until we consider that in Spanish, *child* is *niño* with a simple plural (*niños*) instead of the irregular English plural. We come back to the classic competence versus performance binary when we look at structures like the ones in this passage: instead of allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by apparent error, we must consider what the writer is demonstrating about his/her operational translingualism.

Deciphering intent. When a translingual writer’s text appears to be incomprehensible, I ask the learner to just tell me what he/she intends to say. A reality of this strategy, however, is that the writers are usually so wrapped up in the spoken reconstruction that they aren’t really listening to their own words. As their writing coach, I urge them to try again, this time slowing down so we can jot down some of the reconstructed text. Yes, sometimes, I quite directly repeat what I heard them say, making sure I praise them for the clarity of expression in their speech.

Asking a translingual writer to look away from a problematic text and simply tell a tutor what he/she intended to say offers numerous pedagogical benefits. First, the writer recognizes that linguistic choices in writing do not always successfully reflect intent. Next, the writer sees the tutor or instructor as someone who is interested in understanding rather than as a critic solely focused on finding errors. Finally, the writer sees the tutor as a partner in reshaping linguistic form to fit rhetorical intent.

In the context of translingual pedagogy (which we are shaping as we discover the realities of translingualism), we need to find ways of helping learners recognize their capabilities without quashing their efforts to express themselves. My translingual writers often demonstrate defensiveness about their linguistic competency. They pre-emptively tell me that they aren’t “good” in English or that writing is their worst subject. They expect to be told what is wrong with their writing instead of what works and why it works. The writing center can be the institutional space where linguistic diversity is celebrated, where error is seen not as deficiency but as evidence of brave choices in linguistic intent.

Translingual Centering

Writing centers are at the forefront of the evolving need to devise and implement robust pedagogies for helping translingual writers claim their space in the academy. We cannot overlook the reality that most college instructors, including many writing instructors, lack the specialized knowledge needed to work effectively with translingual writers. This is perhaps the most salient aspect of the writing center's role in institutional response to translingual writers. At the core of how we work with translingual writers is the issue of assessment: every time we examine a translingual text, we are assessing the text on linguistic, rhetorical, disciplinary, and sometimes even political levels. In the recent article, "Beyond Translingual Writing," Jerry Won Lee broaches the conundrum of assessing translingual writing without actually having firm understandings of how we value/position/affirm translingualism in the academy (186). I believe writing centers can solve this conundrum: writing centers, through their evolving experience in examining linguistic multiplicity can explain, demystify, and clarify translingualism for the whole institutional community. As writing center workers, we can contribute richly to discussions of translingual writing by reconstructing traditional theories and practices in second language acquisition; we know how to look beyond what appears to be erroneous in order to discover linguistic, rhetorical, and communicative intent. When we partner with translingual writers to help them discover how to say what they want to say, how to cast their disciplinary knowledge in appropriate linguistic structures, and how to claim their spots in the larger realms of academic spaces, we edify the learner and reshape understandings of linguistic crossings.

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