

# ENGAGING STUDENTS IN WRITING-TO-LEARN: PROMOTING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

**INTRODUCTION:** *This is an invited contribution, and we give the circumstances of the invitation in place of the usual abstract. The last academic year was the first year of a major writing-across-the-curriculum initiative for the entire City University of New York. After a first round of professional development, participants asked for help addressing "language issues" – issues of student writers who are not native speakers of English (about half of CUNY's student population), who are struggling with standard English usage, and/or who are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse. Faculty leaders met and agreed that the person who could best help with such issues was Vivian Zamel. She was invited to give the keynote for a faculty development event before the beginning of the spring term. The talk she gave, highly interactive and rich in examples, seemed a great success to all involved (including, as it happened, the co-editors of JBW). We asked if she would allow us to publish a version of that talk. We cannot supply, in this context, the lively interchanges with the audience (especially the "work" participants were asked to do with student writing and faculty evaluations of it), but we can offer a particularly cogent and compelling explanation of what writing-to-learn pedagogy should be and do, compelling most of all for the way it eschews abstractions and exhortations in favor of the most powerful arguments and evidence: that supplied by the students themselves.*

My understanding of the struggles and successes of linguistically diverse students is informed both by my research on these students' experiences as learners and writers and by my own teaching. This work has given me insight into students' composing processes, those factors that promote and undermine their acquisition of language and literacy, their potential as readers and writers of English, and their ability to engage with the academic work they are assigned. So it is fitting to begin with the kind of reflections I regularly collect from students, reflections that contribute to my understanding of the challenges these

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students face as writers in a language they are necessarily still in the process of acquiring. These reflections often focus, not surprisingly, on the constraints of using English, on not feeling free to express oneself, on the fear of being mistaken or misunderstood. The following account is revealing for what it tells us not only about this student's experiences with composing in English, but about the efforts she recognizes she must make in order to deal with what she calls the "barriers to writing"<sup>1</sup> :

When I had decided on what I was going to write, I wanted to write right at first time. That always made me work very slowly and too carefully. Choosing the proper words, figuring out correct sentences, making up gaps between sentences which seemed jumping from one idea to another often forced me to make long pauses between sentences and paragraphs in writing. Sometimes, when I had ideas in several aspects, it took time for me to decide the right one I really want to say...As a non-native speaker of English, I have two main barriers in writing. On the one hand, sometimes, I found it difficult to get proper ideas or attitudes to comment on, to argue with, or to discuss some issues because of lacking cultural, political and American academic background. On the other hand, when I write, ideas come out in Chinese. I found the thought was limited by the language deficiency and I kept switching frequently between Chinese and English.

Here we see a number of themes that are recurrent in students' accounts: a preoccupation with being careful and choosing the right words and terms; a concern about connecting one idea with another; the difficulty of juggling and saying things correctly while generating thoughts at the same time; the pull of working in English while ideas in another language intrude; the tensions of writing about issues that assume a familiarity with and knowledge about the context surrounding these issues. This student's reflection on her writing experiences makes clear her own awareness of her difficulties, the efforts she is trying to make to address these difficulties, and her recognition that these attempts may not be successful. Clearly, this is a student who is working hard, as she puts it, "to write it right." Unfortunately, as she herself acknowledges, the texts she produces may not reflect these efforts.

While students' accounts contribute to my own theories about their writing and the kinds of instruction that is responsive to their needs, as student populations have become more diverse and as faculty have grown increasingly concerned about the challenges and tensions of teaching these students, my work has taken me beyond the



writing classroom and has involved research into students' experiences as they enter courses across the curriculum (Zamel). As part of this research, I have asked students to write about their experiences in these courses, about what they wanted faculty to understand about the challenges and constraints they faced as learners in these classes. As I have collected students' responses, I have found that they reveal a number of pervasive themes. Students referred to patience, sensitivity, and encouragement as key factors that affected their learning. They spoke of the kinds of assistance they needed, pointing to clearer and more explicitly detailed assignments. They asked for responses to written work that both credited them for what they had accomplished and that would help them better understand faculty expectations. Importantly, an overwhelming number of students wanted faculty to know that they were all too well aware that their struggles with English were ongoing and that these struggles were likely to be reflected in their written work. This is indeed what the student's account that we looked at earlier revealed. They seemed to have a strong sense that because of the difficulties that were reflected in their texts, their struggles with learning were misperceived and the efforts they had made were underestimated. But they also expressed their hope that their work not be discounted and viewed as limited because of language issues.

Yet another source of information about students' classroom experiences have been several case studies I have undertaken. I conducted interviews with students whom I first came to know in my first year writing course and whose work I followed as these students progressed through courses across the curriculum. In addition to meeting with me, these students also wrote about their course experiences, thus producing a set of rich documents about these experiences. One of these students, Martha, a student from Colombia, majored in biology, but took a range of courses in a variety of disciplines. Contrary to what we may believe about the ability of ESL students to fare better in scientifically and mathematically oriented courses, Martha experienced the greatest sense of frustration in science courses, primarily, she felt, because of the absence of writing in these courses. Although Martha began as a first year student who acknowledged her fear of writing, she came to view writing as indispensable for learning, for thinking through ideas, for making it possible to connect what she knew with the assigned work, for letting her professors know what she both understood and was confused about, for acquiring language. When the opportunity to write for these purposes was not available to her in courses, Martha indicated that "the absence of writing took away from me the power of feeling firm, strong, present and interested in the subject matter." The following is an excerpt from one of her written accounts, one that captures Martha's sense of discouragement as she reflected on the absence of writing in one of her courses and the ways in which



this undermined her learning and her acquisition of literacy and language. Her frustration and disappointment, I believe, are palpable.

I only heard dates and facts. Facts, dates. I reacted by sitting quiet and feeling very frustrated. I did not feel like sharing any of my opinions . . . The lectures were missing the combination of creativity of my classmates' reflections. I started to lose the grounded self I carried with me from my ESL class experience. I tried several times to become visible during the lectures by letting out my voice. But I found myself lost because the lectures were without writing . . . I remember that silent students in the classroom started to feel like a normal part of the lecture. Many times two or three words were my contributions in class. They were replacing the long and sometimes unclear sentences that previously in my ESL class were disentangled to reveal a powerful thought . . . My writing started to experience a metamorphosis because I was copying dates and facts from the blackboard. There was not a drop of motivation to enjoy my journey of learning. I felt illiterate at the end of the semester. I did not learn a single new word.

Note, in particular, Martha's recognition that the absence of opportunities to write in response to course issues led to her struggle with acquiring the language of that course and to a regression in her learning.

Yet another student who participated in this longitudinal investigation of students' experiences across the curriculum was Motoko, a student from Japan who majored in sociology. She, like Martha, was disheartened by courses that didn't encourage reactions to and reflections about course material and by assignments that she found confusing or vague and that provided few opportunities for engagement. But, as in the case of Martha, there were courses that invited and built on her thinking, that created opportunities for her to find connections with unfamiliar material, that allowed her to take risks with learning. The following account reflects such a context for learning at the beginning of a philosophy course:

The first day of the course, the professor gave us an ungraded paper assignment. The subject was about our image toward philosophy. On the second day, he posed the same question to the class, and started to call on the students from the first row. Since I was sitting in the left corner of the front row, he called on me by verifying my first name. I was nervous to speak up in front of everybody who I had not yet known, but because I already organized my idea and image



toward philosophy last night in my assignment, though it is far from the fluent English, I somehow managed to bring myself to the end.

After I finished, the professor briefly summarized what I just said by using more philosophical sounding words. Then he raised two important issues from my statement and wrote down on the blackboard. I felt so delighted. I felt I was included. I felt my existence was affirmed. The reason why I was and still am hesitated to raise my voice in the classroom is because I am always intimidated by two big worries, which are "Will everybody be able to understand what I say?" and "Does my idea is important enough to be raised?" Most of the time, these two questions envelop my mind so that I cannot release my words; especially when I sense that the class circumstance is neither comfortable nor worthy enough to take the risk.

But this time, the professor displayed very warm and sensitive conduct before me. Perhaps that was a really trivial matter for other people, but because I was always worried about my English deficiency, even such a small matter became a big deal in my mind. A kind of hope was gradually growing in my mind, and I sensed that something urged me to take future chances in the class.

So much is revealed in Motoko's text: her acknowledgment of her resistance to "rais[ing] [her] voice," her recognition that her English is far from fluent, her concern that she may not be understood or that her idea may not be important, all of which, she acknowledges, often lead to her own self-censorship. Her text further points to those conditions that allowed her to transcend these constraints and concerns, so that it was possible for her to feel included and heard. Using writing as a source for exploring, in a safe way, the subject matter of the course, the teacher made it possible for Motoko to speak up in class, for she had already had an opportunity to articulate, in writing, what she called her "image toward philosophy." Drawing on and validating her attempt at understanding, the teacher proceeded to introduce unfamiliar language and concepts that undoubtedly enriched her initial understanding. Importantly, this process, which allowed Motoko to take the kinds of risks that are critical for learning, gave her to believe that "future chances" of this sort could be taken.

What Martha and Motoko have shared with me and written about, like much of what is revealed in other students' reflections, have given me insight into the academic life of these students and what we ought to be doing in both English classes and beyond. It is often assumed in many institutions, and I have certainly found this to be the case in my



own, that the purpose of English and writing based courses is to fix students' language and writing before and in order to take on what is assumed to be the real work of the academy. This expectation illustrates the myth of transience, a pervasive belief in higher education that students' problems are temporary and can be remediated so long as other courses take on the responsibility of doing so (Rose). This expectation is based on the assumption that language is a decontextualized skill that can be acquired once and for all, an assumption that fails to recognize that it is the very contexts in which language is used that give it meaning. Researchers who study the work of courses across the curriculum point to the problematic nature of assuming that language is some fixed ability that determines and ensures understanding of unfamiliar texts and subject matter, especially when this is complicated by new language (see, for example, Chiseri-Strater, Sternglass, and Walvoord and McCarthy). In describing the ways in which disciplines work, these researchers have found that the language and expectations of courses are inextricably tied to the underlying perspective and assumptions of each discipline. I have found this work instructive. But I find it even more useful to view each classroom as a culture in its own right—a culture with its own norms, conventions, expectations—and to understand that it is the process of working within this classroom that makes it possible for participants to acquire its discourse. This certainly helps explain why a student like Motoko had such divergent experiences even in courses within the same discipline, some excluding her from these courses, others inviting her to participate in and contribute to them.

It is crucial to understand that while students can certainly make progress in their English and writing classes when these courses engage students in compelling and meaningful work, and this certainly was the case for Martha and Motoko, their process of acquisition is just that, an ongoing and incremental process of approximation. What contributes to students' increasing fluency and confidence throughout their experiences in courses is their immersion in interesting and complex ideas, their engagement with rich material and discussions of texts, including their own, and the opportunities they are given to use writing and language as a means for taking risks with, formulating, and rehearsing both ideas and language. The writing that these students produce, the increasing complexity of their ideas, the new language and specialized terms they acquire to express these ideas—all of this is enabled by the conditions of each course. These students' learning and their acquisition of language are all necessarily works in progress, and to the extent that students are given multiple and ongoing opportunities to try out their ideas and language, and to get supportive and instructive feedback about these attempts, they continue to make progress. This is clearly what Martha had come to understand as she



recognized the ways in which even one course could make her feel "illiterate" and gave her the sense that she had not learned a "single new word." This is what Motoko was suggesting as she spoke of how her ungraded paper assignment promoted her participation in class and became the basis for acquiring language particular to this course, what she called "sophisticated and philosophical sounding words."

Given that language is acquired within the context of genuine and meaningful opportunities to use that language, it is problematic to assume that students will come to courses across the curriculum fixed and ready as a result of their previous experiences in English or writing classes. Academic disciplines, even individual courses within the same discipline, use and depend on terms, conventions, and methods of inquiry that are specific to these courses. Doing well in these disciplines and learning their way of looking at and studying the world requires *doing* the discipline, which can only be enacted and fostered in discipline-specific courses (Elbow). It is ultimately counterproductive, therefore, to expect writing and English courses to be responsible for providing students with the various languages and multiple ways of seeing required across the curriculum.

What this means for faculty is that they need to seriously consider the ways in which their coursework can contribute to and build on the learning of students, acknowledging that this learning is a long-term and evolving endeavor that is promoted through ongoing immersion in and sustained engagement with ideas and language. This is especially the case for students for whom English is a second or third language. It is even more so the case for those students who have had limited literacy experiences in their previous schooling, whether in English or in their own language. These students, in particular, depend on the ways in which the opportunities and invitations of each classroom extend their academic and linguistic repertoires.

Specifically, what this means is that students need multiple opportunities to use writing as a way to learn rather than only as a means for demonstrating what they have already learned, both about language and about the course content. This means opportunities to write for exploring and sharing what students already know, for creating connections between what students know and the course issues, for encouraging risk-taking, for promoting active participation, for building a sense of community between students and teacher and among students. Writing-to-learn assignments allow students to explain course matters to themselves, to discover what they are thinking, to concretize for their readers and for themselves *that* they are thinking.

These writing-to-learn assignments can be enacted in numerous ways. Professors can assign what is called the "one minute paper" at the end of certain classes, asking students to write about one thing they learned that day as well as one thing that confused them. These



can be the basis of future instruction. Students can be assigned notes or letters that they write to one another that explain their take on a particular problem, text, or issue. At my own institution, a number of faculty have assigned reading journals and have found them to an invaluable means for fostering students' connections with, interpretations of, and questions about assigned readings. Written reactions about the readings allow faculty to discover how students understand the texts they have been assigned, the ways in which they are connecting to and interpreting course texts, the complexities and confusions students are grappling with, the extent to which they are reading in an active and critical way.

Journal assignments can invite open-ended responses as well as offer specific suggestions for what students could do in response to assigned texts. Students, for example, can be asked to respond to a particular question posed or to relate a particular reading to another reading already assigned. They can be asked to write about what struck them or what they identified with. The following represents two such journal entries. The first was written in response to "Mango Says Good-Bye" by Sandra Cisneros, a text assigned in an ESL writing course:

As someone said in class, this story was easy to read, but difficult to understand. Everytime I read this story, it gives me a different impression or image and an abstract idea. I don't really know what the author meant.

"Mango says goodbye sometimes"

This title is very funny. Is "Mango" supposed to be a street name? In this section it's as if "Mango" was a human being. I wonder if "Mango" symbolizes another part of the author. A shadow of herself.

She was held captive—captive by her shadow, old morality or convention. She has been playing the role that her society or environment taught. She wanted to be free, but she couldn't. Then finally "Mango" let her go, she was released from her shadow.

Even though the story gives me different ideas, as far as the last part is concerned, my image is the same all the time. It absolutely reminds me of a play (drama) 'Et Dukkehjen' (I don't know the English title) by Herik Ibsen. This play really made waves and it was said that it contributed to the women's liberation movement.

When the main character of this drama decided to stop playing her role in the house, even though she had three children, she left home. She was fully determined not to be a doll. She wanted to be herself and free.

Cisneros also had been playing her role for a long time as



she was her mother's "smart cookie." She will leave "Mango." She will leave home to find herself and her identity. When we see her next time, I'm sure we won't see "Mango" anymore.

The second entry was written in response to a chapter in *Nisa*, a text assigned in an anthropology course:

The Chapter 6 "marriage" confuse me in some vocabulary, but I understood the rule of marriage of the kungs women, and I found it strange too. I think it is unfair for the parents to chose their daughters a husband very young, if they travel with them, hunting and gathering when the childrens are little, why don't the parents keep their children with them until they are able to understand the meaning of marriage, or they are ready for it by their own, except give them away to be cared and maintained by a strange man.

I also found it touching in some aspects, for example when *Nisa* express her feelings about the times she was forced by her parents to live with Tashay, her husband, and she ran away many times to sleep in the bush. Also when she was living in his parents village, that she felt lonely and sad without her mother. It's was obvious that she still needed her mother's affection and care, but by that time the parents seem just to worry about somebody or a man to maintain her, not about her feelings.

Note the richness of these students' responses, the opportunity that writing has provided for making connections with the text, for revealing what these students brought to the text, for using language in meaningful ways to engage with the assigned readings. In the case of the first entry, for example, the student revealed her previous reading of Ibsen's play as well as the connection she was making between this chapter by Cisneros and one she had read earlier, "Smart Cookie." Note as well the extent to which writing allowed these students to make sense of these readings, to grapple with and get beyond the confusion and difficulty these students alluded to in their responses.

Yet another variation on journal responses that I have found particularly valuable for driving home the active nature of reading are double-entry notes. For these notes, students copy short passages of texts that had significance for or resonated for them, that they found moving or puzzling, that reminded them of their own experiences or of another course issue or text. Then they respond to these passages, and in the process of writing these responses, they literally uncover why these passages struck them the way they did. The following are examples of two students' double entry notes, written in response to



an autobiographical excerpt by Rosa Parks assigned in a course focused on the history of racism and civil rights:

*Copied text*

My mother had a mind of her own. She always held to the belief that none of us should be mistreated because of our race.

In reality we had to face the fact that we were not as free as the books said. What they taught us in school didn't apply to us as a race.

*Reactions*

I like it because Rosa's mother was like a symbol of a life freedom! Her mind was very independent and clear in front of society. I think Rosa inherited her mother's courage. Rosa was as big as the Statue of Liberty in front of her black society that organized a boycott on December 5, after she was arrested because she opened her "eyes to the prize."

When Rosa Parks talks about African-American, I had a horrible feeling. No other immigrants can feel about that. Think if you were kidnapped to be a slavery from your country, how difficult the situation would be? "This is not the home of the blacks" is the poem written by Langston Hughes had expressed. Rosa had showed her progressive action 12 years before she arrested. But she was taken off the bus. I was shocked by the humiliating segregation law. You have to stand up and give a seat to somebody else because you are black. What a racism! When I was in China, even though there was discrimination to the north people who came down to the south, the south people at most could call them bad names and cheat them, but could never show out.

Note the particular ways each of these students is connecting with the reading, choosing the passages that spoke to them, and revealing why they found these passages compelling. Note as well these students' references to other course readings, thus indicating how this kind of writing allows students to see course texts in light of one another. Finally, these double-entry notes reveal that students are trying out some of the recurring language of the course theme—language that had been unfamiliar to them at the outset of the course—thus dem-



onstrating the central role that writing can play in promoting the very process of language acquisition.

It is by engaging in written responses of this sort that students begin to understand that reading is not a passive process of decoding words, but rather that it is quite literally, a process of composing. For students who are used to getting through texts with yellow marker and bilingual dictionary in hand, and who therefore are not reading in an engaged way, this is a critical insight for them to have. Note how Jenny, a student from Taiwan, reflects on the ways in which writing journal entries, a new experience for her, had made it possible for her to engage with her reading:

I have never been asked to write journal entries in Taiwan. That was why I shrank when I understood the requirements of this course. However, after trying to write a journal constantly for three months, I feel kind of interested and freer in writing . . . I pay all my attention to the ideas I want to say . . .

Before [in Taiwan] I forgot and threw away all the knowledge in textbooks after exams. But now when I mark or highlight some sentences that I consider important while reading, I would write down the reasons why they are important to me, I try to make connections and associations between the contents and between my experience or between one paragraph and another. I think then the knowledge in textbooks would become part of my mind finally. My brain was a temporary storehouse for knowledge before, but now it plays an active role.

I am struck by the extent to which Jenny recognizes that in order to internalize "the knowledge in textbooks," she must reconstruct that knowledge through writing. I am also impressed by her authoritative stance, one that comes through her act of authorship.

In addition to assigning reading journals, some faculty have instituted short in-class, ungraded writing to get students to think about a question posed or an issue addressed in the assigned reading. They have found that this has increased the participation of students who are troubled by the difficulty of following what is being said or who are concerned about both what they will and how they will say it. Writing done under these circumstances provides students with a safe opportunity to find their way into class discussion, to rehearse what they then say publicly in class. ESL students, or any students for that matter, who feel lost or who resist speaking in class, may be more likely to participate when they have an opportunity to write *first*, and when what they have written in these informal pieces are acknowledged and valued as contributions to the course. By way of illustration, I turn



again to one of Jenny's reflections, one in which she recounts how overwhelmed she felt in courses whose primary or only activities involved listening and responding:

Because of my weak English ability in speaking and listening, I felt very frustrated and depressed when I could not understand what the professors at U Mass, Boston talked about in class. However, it seemed to be unfair to regard me as a student without any thinking ability by my external behavior. I sat silently in the classroom because I had to listen to the professors carefully and tried to comprehend. And how could I understand and respond to a topic I was unfamiliar with? I could not understand the professors' questions maybe because I did not understand the English totally or because I needed more time to think about how to answer in English. But the professors sometimes had no patience to wait for my response and then changed to the next topic right away. . . . I met similar problems in the group discussion. I performed awfully in my first time to share my ideas in a group. . . . No complete sentence came out of my mouth, only separate English words. I got more and more nervous. When I tried my best to make English sentences in my brain, I could feel the other members were almost out of patience at that time. I lowered my head immediately and did not say a word.

However, when Jenny is given the opportunity to write in response to course issues as a basis for interacting in class, her attitude and learning undergo a transformation. It's as if her writing has given her to trust the use of her spoken voice:

I was freed and encouraged to speak out what I really wanted to say . . . Also, I like group discussion more and more for we could share ideas to the same subject. I could feel that the ideas presented by me in the group discussion through my writing were taken seriously by my classmates and the professor.

With respect to more formal paper assignments, it is critical to examine the assignment itself as a source of difficulty. It is helpful to ask ourselves: What previous or underlying knowledge is assumed by either the assigned reading or writing? Am I expecting students to draw on knowledge or experiences that are unfamiliar to them? How can I know whether this is the case? To what extent have students had an opportunity to practice and receive feedback about the very kind of work that the assignment is asking for? How much guidance is provided in order to help students address an assignment?



By posing these sorts of questions, we can begin to acknowledge the extent to which our assignments may be compromising students' writing and language ability and thus contributing to their difficulties. This is certainly borne out by our own experiences, for many of us can attest to the fact that when students are asked to write about a difficult text or to do a particularly challenging piece of writing, "things fall apart," particularly with respect to students' syntactic control. While this may occur because students are overwhelmed by the complexity of the task, another reason that accounts for writing that appears problematic to us has to do with students' attempts to approximate the very discourse of the course material we've assigned. In other words, students, distrusting their own voices and language resources, perhaps because these are rarely made room for in the work of the course, are so intent on trying out the academic language that they have been reading, that their writing appears incoherent, impenetrable even. Hence the need for students to explore the issues and use the terms raised in the readings and assumed by the assignment *before* the assignment is given. Hence the need to give students opportunities to write about the course issues and readings as a way for faculty to uncover misunderstandings and misinterpretations, as a way for faculty to respond to these efforts by offering instruction and support, as a way for faculty to intervene when students rely too heavily on and reproduce prematurely what students view as the authoritative language of their readings. But I want to emphasize that what I am recommending here is not just *more* writing, but writing of a different kind – writing for promoting learning, reflection, active engagement. It is opportunities of this sort that allow students to take risks with learning at the same time they provide us with important moments for teaching *before* the stakes are high, before students' work is evaluated.

When papers are assigned, giving students the opportunity to draft their texts allows students to first commit themselves to generating ideas and to thinking in complex ways. Allowing for a process of drafting and revising papers means that both we and the students need not be distracted by surface features of language at the outset, something they and we are likely to do if there is only one opportunity to submit a paper or if our feedback for revisions focuses on these concerns. My own long-term experiences as a reader of portfolios of course papers – submitted to meet the university's writing proficiency requirement – indicate that faculty, especially when they are responding to students who are struggling with English language issues, do indeed prioritize surface-level issues. Even when revisions are required, faculty heavily attend to correct language use on first drafts, often missing or ignoring larger meaning-level concerns, perhaps because these concerns are more difficult to untangle and address.

A series of related underlying assumptions seem to account for



these kinds of reactions. Teachers may assume, for example, that students can learn from feedback of this sort; that it is the teacher's responsibility – to the student and to the institution – to point out errors first and foremost; that not pointing to errors reinforces students' problems; that learning and language acquisition are promoted when texts are dealt with in this way; that asking students for revisions based on these kinds of responses and corrections will contribute to students' understanding and progress. And yet, when I examine students' revisions (often submitted as part of their portfolios), I am struck by what I see. The texts are not much improved. Indeed, there are sections that read less coherently when students try to accommodate the changes their teachers have made or suggested. My sense is that these students have learned little in the process, except perhaps that their writing is inadequate and that they ought to find someone to edit their papers. The subsequent writing that these students do, as evidenced by other papers submitted in the portfolio, drives home the point that students' writing does not benefit from this kind of feedback.

The students' papers and professors' responses that I have studied make the case for the importance of using writing as an opportunity for teaching, for responding to students' ideas, for responding to what is there rather than just focusing on what isn't. It is in this way that students can go back into their texts and rework them in light of their readers' comments. However, I want to emphasize that in the course of providing comments, we need to work at offering responses that students will be able to read, to translate into some form of action, and to learn from. After all, students who are struggling readers and writers will have particular difficulty deciphering and comprehending the responses we write if these responses are cryptic, abbreviated, and ambiguous. We therefore need to ask ourselves: What must students already know for these responses to be instructive? What do I assume will be understood when I raise this particular question or make this particular marking or recommendation? We also need to keep in mind that because revisiting texts means that students are necessarily rereading them, students may be able to monitor some of the surface features of writing that they missed in their first drafts. By asking students to carefully review their own writing, something that unpracticed readers and writers are not in the habit of doing, we are giving them an opportunity to draw on their linguistic resources and intuitions in order to monitor and control language. This is critical especially if students have had few opportunities to read their texts carefully or to have had their texts read thoughtfully, the very situation that is perpetuated when all that students are asked to do is to insert the changes and corrections of their teachers' markings. An important finding that draws on my own teaching as well as on reports from colleagues – a finding that is confirmed by a large body of research –



is that while heavy-handed error correction may result in cleaner revisions, if revisions are required at all, subsequent new papers show little signs of improvement with respect to these features of writing. Hence the need for much less correction but more consistent error instruction. This allows both teachers and students to attend to specific, recurring features of writing, rather than feeling so overwhelmed that they don't try to address any of them.

I need to underline, however, that this approach to language issues, while more likely to encourage students to use writing as a genuine source for learning, does not necessarily eliminate errors altogether. Rather, it is more likely to contribute to the reduction of error, which is what we should be striving for. The acquisition of language, after all, is a complex, long-term, uneven, and context-dependent process, and immersion in unfamiliar language and content and ongoing attempts at language use may give rise to new, although more sophisticated kinds of errors. Thus, even though a student may have made a great deal of progress in ESL and writing courses, different kinds of error are inevitable. Note, for example, the following text written by Edwin for an ESL composition course:

Proponents of U.S. English say that they have to make English the official language because the language is the only thing that keep them together. They also say that foreign languages are in competition with the English language (acc. to Hayakawa's letter). The view the non-Speaking persons as something dangerous for this country. For example in Nunberg's reading say "In a short time, proponents say, we will have large, permanent non-English speaking communities in our midst, with the prospect of separatist movements and ensuing "language wars."

The proponents say that the government is spending too much money translating documents such as the driving tests and voting ballots. According to "Argument in Favor of Proposition 38" they say that "foreign ballots are discriminatory, only Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian and Alaskan native languages are targeted for special treatment in the law." In the same articles they argue that foreign language ballots are costly. In California in 1982 the cost exceded \$1,200,000

Regarding bilingual education, the reading "A war over words" says that immigrants would learn English faster if they were immersed in it and if bilingual school classes were severely cut back." In the same article McBee says that "In most states, it is possible to get a high-school-equivalency diploma without knowing because tests are offered in Spanish and



French." In the reading "A war over words" the proponents say that "they want to halt the advance of Spanish as an alternative language and to cut back on the \$133 million spent by the federal government.

On the other hand, we have those who are fighting to keep this safe for those who haven't been born in here. One of the person against U.S. English, Joseph Trevino, says the "pro-English move will promote racism." He also claims that "Instead of promoting the that language is, this has polarized communities." If English became the official language, that would bring discrimination against all the foreigners that don't speak English. All the program that are bilingual as in the police department, fire department and court services would be eliminated. With English as official language all the bilingual school would be closed. Nunberg argues that "the main effect would make it harder for immigrant who haven't yet mastered English to enter the social and economic mainstream." In the article "A war over words" the opponents of U.S. English think that "making English official could divide people and tarnish this nation's legacy of tolerance and diversity."

In reference to ballots, how the non-English speaking would vote if they don't understand what is on the ballots.

Also, according to "Argument against proposition 38" . . . bilingual ballots encourage assimilation by encouraging all citizens to participate in their government." About the cost of translating the ballots, this article says that the cost is minimal. For example in San Francisco they cost the average homeowner less than 3¢ annually. The cost is minimal so, what is the big deal about translating ballots.

The U.S. English also want to control immigration, and send back all the illegal aliens. Eventhought they have been living in the U.S. for who knows how many years. Also they're paying taxes and living like any normal American. The proponents of U.S. English, seem to me like if they've forgot how this country was made. This country was made with so many differents cultures and persons from all over the world. Why they cannot share this country with other immigrants? These new immigrant just want to find the same opportunities, freedom, etc. that the first immigrant found. These persons seem to be so selfish because they have what they want and don't want anybody else to come and enjoy this country. If English become the official language, this country would loss the sense of a free country and the land of opportunities.

Each of us could locate a number of errors throughout this text. It is important to recognize, however, that which errors we would focus



on and how we would respond to these would reveal the idiosyncratic, subjective, and contingent nature of reading and responding to texts. Instead of focusing on these errors, I would argue that we need to note and acknowledge the academic language and moves Edwin is trying out and the risks he is taking in order to deal with the complexity of issues he is writing about. Edwin's attempt to use this unfamiliar language becomes all the more striking when we look at a text he wrote a year earlier, during his first semester at the university:

The Porto Rican culture it's distinguish by its hospitality with the turist for example. The families are together any time. We enjoy together the traditional parties and days, like Christmas, the Holly week, mothers and fathers day.

Comparing my culture with Jill Stover whose an American, are very similar. But always no matter what culture there is an exception. This exception its the independence the youths have. The american teens to get indipendecize and to get their own money for their needs. At P.R. we don't need to. At P.R. fathers give their kids all what they need and wants and for that reason most of the kids don't adquire any kind of independence, also most of them feel isn't important for their future lifes.

My family is very union we help each other in everything, any trubble, etc. My family consist my mother, sister and I.

This student's remarkable growth as a writer demonstrates why it is critical that writing be sustained throughout the curriculum as a means for learning, as a means for trying out the discourse of an academic subject. It is in this trying out—through, for example, journal entries or through drafts of papers that are responded to in thoughtful and instructive ways—that language and knowledge are, and continue to be, acquired.

I have found it helpful in considering the work we ask of our students to think about our own apprenticeship into our discipline-specific communities; about the kind of ongoing reading, writing, discussion that have made and continue to make our growing expertise possible; about the recursive and reciprocal way that our writing and reading build upon one another; about the continual drafting we do; about the feedback we depend on from supportive readers long before considering sending these texts off to be evaluated by readers whom we don't know; about how much writing is integral to the thinking we do, not just in recording our thoughts, but in making these thoughts possible by making them visible on paper. If this characterizes our own experiences, if we find these conditions conducive, even necessary, for our own thinking and learning—and we are already expert in much of



what we think and write about – then it is critical to think about how these very conditions need to be enacted for students who have little understanding of and experience with this process. While this could very well apply to students whose first language is not English, it would have implications for any student whose academic and literacy experiences have been limited and problematic.

It is appropriate, given how much I draw on and learn from students' words and their work, that I close with a student's text. I turn again to Martha, one of the students who was involved in my across-the-curriculum case study. After reconsidering the many pieces that she had written about her courses, Martha wrote one final reflection about the process of writing these pieces. She wrote:

I became aware of my needs in classrooms by doing this across the curriculum project. Although I was a timid learner in a foreign country, I came to realize that my needs in a classroom are no different from the needs of many, regardless of their nationality and language, that making connections with the material used in class by continuously being immersed in reading and writing, supported my learning and the vision of my professors. It has been because of some professors, that I have gained understanding about the importance of homework assignments by drafting my papers and pushing my own limits. I became comfortable writing journals and exchanging papers with my classmates as a way to improve my work and also to learn with others and from others. One of the major dynamics that has supported my inner growth as a person has been the art of doing revisions of my academic work in combination with the presence that I sensed from my professors when reading my work, when they responded to my questions, observations and even silence in our classrooms.

Martha goes on to conclude this account by confirming again the central role that writing has played in her learning. In the following sentences, it is worth noting that she uses the word "metamorphosis," a term she had acquired and internalized two years earlier in a course in which she read and wrote about Kafka's work, and that she uses ellipses to punctuate, quite literally, the ongoing nature of learning. These final sentences read:

Writing about all of these experiences helped me be a resilient learner and to reclaim my voice and love for learning in a foreign country. It is like a metamorphosis with no ending . . .



## Notes

1. All student entries have been reproduced exactly as they were written.

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