

Joseph Burzynski

Conflating Language and Offense: Composing in an Incarcerated Space

Further, just as in the English Only debates, the boundaries separating one language from another are imagined as fixed, so in representations of students, the language of the academy is seen as discrete from the language of the outside, associated with students' home neighborhoods or ethnic, class, and racial identities. Finally, the composition course, or a fixed sequence of required writing courses, is charged with moving students/foreigners to the academy toward that ideal state of competence in academic English writing through a predetermined set of stages of writing development. Writing itself, like language, is understood in reified form, rather than as a set of heterogeneous and shifting practices.

(Homer and Trimbur 614)

A familiar refrain

PERSONALLY, I WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THIS. NOR, MIGHT I ADD, was I trained for this. The first class was filtering out of the room, the students' newly issued text books, college-ruled paper, pens, and pencils all tucked under their arms. I noticed my breathing for the first time in over two hours. I released a long, slow exhale, the anxiety and apprehension lessening with each passing moment. I had just been introduced to the most linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse class in my few short years of teaching. There were students from the Dominican Republic and Mexico. I met students whose parents were from Sweden, Germany, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. Others were from Appalachian Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. There were students from urban Columbus, Cincinnati, and Dayton, Ohio. Some had dropped out of school years earlier and had recently passed their GED. Still others would not have been out of place with the "traditional" students in the last setting in which I had taught: my graduate program at a small, urban Catholic university in northwestern Pennsylvania.

As this first class ended, though, it was not the linguistic or cultural differences with which I was presented that gave me pause. Rather, it was the clunky, purple pendant that I fumbled with as I packed up. I could not figure out how to handle it without a finger or a pen coming too close to the grey button situated in the pendant's middle. One push of the button

would send a signal somewhere to an officer sitting in front of a screen in a control room. The officer would then direct two officers to drop immediately what they were doing and run to my location. At that moment, I was instructing for Urbana University in GED room #2 in the lower level of London Correctional Institution, a men's minimum and medium security prison in central Ohio. Pressing the button would mean that I was in or anticipated immediate physical danger.

While I never accidentally or intentionally pushed the button—nor, I must add, did I ever feel threatened in the three years I worked at London—each of the students I had just met was an incarcerated offender, and they and the place presented a significant challenge to me. Not only did I have to contend with teaching writing and my students' linguistic backgrounds, but I had to work within this space that was designed to control, organize, and observe people. I knew that I wanted to teach these students a rhetorical approach to writing contexts, but as for working with offenders within this institutional location, I was at a loss. Further, I had had little time to prepare for this, pedagogically or psychologically. I had been offered these courses at the “prison,” the most frequently used referent for London by the University community, a few weeks before the start of classes. My wife was a new, tenure-line faculty member in the English department, and the classes were offered to me as a favor of sorts.¹ At the time, I had no particular commitment to educating offenders. I especially had not considered any broader moral or ethical implications of the work, the space, or the students. Frankly, I was interested in collecting a paycheck for doing something exciting and considerably different than any teaching that I had done or considered doing. Aside from expecting to employ the methods I developed in my two years as a graduate teaching assistant and the basic writing scholarship I studied and wrote about for my master's thesis, I had little direction in those first semesters.

In this writing, I will trace a particular history of incarcerated education, broadly sketch the linguistic characteristics of incarcerated students, discuss how approaches to basic writing and ESL composition scholarship over the last few decades both inform and create tensions in this context, and call for a progressive linguistic approach to the correctional composition classroom that foregrounds the classroom as a community in which offender-students can examine their language(s) through economic, social, cultural, and political lenses. While I think that there are places where the incarcerated classroom's interests converge

1. Several years after my hiring, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the person who had recruited me for the classes, told me that my CV, which listed significant community, political, and labor organizing experience, gave off the “social worker” vibe that he was looking for. While I would have hoped that my master's work in basic writing scholarship would have carried more weight, this anecdote serves, nonetheless, to highlight the metaphorical associations that often accompany teaching in an incarcerated setting.

with those of the outs² classrooms, I hesitate to assert transferable practices as my primary aim here. Rather, classes like the one that I encountered in GED room #2 seem to present important challenges to overly refined (intra)disciplinary boundaries of literacy education (e.g. composition, basic writing, English as a Second Language), especially in locations where material and political conditions appear to supersede pedagogical concerns. In an incarcerated setting, literacy—and education, generally speaking—is placed counter to the outward and visible signs of captivity and control. For instance, working with an offender to describe his ethos in a given text can be simultaneously enlightening (he is equipped with a rhetorical tool) and restricting (it may reinforce a connection between his literacy and his otherness as an offender). It is this relationship between literacy, location, and pedagogy that makes the incarcerated classroom worth reflecting upon.

A localized history

Though London is only a half an hour away from Urbana's small, tree-lined residential campus, its barbed-wire and minimum and medium security offenders present a significant contrast. According to the Ohio Central School System (OCSS),³ such college-level education programs—like others across the country—were started in the mid 1970s as a way to confront recidivism. This move also coincided broadly with the aims and *intensions* of the open admissions movement in higher education, as these programs took advantage of offenders' access to two different grants: the federal Basic Education Opportunity Grant—which was later subsumed into the Pell grant—and the Ohio Instructional Grant. Access to these grants was awarded in the mid 1960s, but there had been no institutional structure through which offenders could take advantage of the awards. From the late 1970s until 1994, prison programs were funded by these grants, and offenders could receive associates and bachelors degrees. When the U.S. congress enacted the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the grant funding was eliminated ("OCSS-History"). Across the country, higher education in prisons was eliminated or greatly reduced. Over the next few years, colleges and universities closed their programs or cut them back to match whatever private or state level funding they could raise or access. In 1997, Ohio mandated that state-funded higher education programs could not offer degrees, and the remaining programs were renamed as Advanced Job Training programs, offering one-and two-year certificates. The courses remained college-level and transferable to other colleges and universities, but this turn was decidedly towards re-entry job training. Business curricula were mandated, and certificates

2. Prison slang for the outside world.

3. The Ohio Central School System is the school district that oversees all educational programs within facilities operated by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

with titles like "Business Skills," "Hotel and Restaurant Management," and "Leadership Skills Development" are now awarded. Today, the Ohio Penal Education Consortium consists of 17 colleges and universities that operate within this post-1997 mission and structure.

A correctional higher education setting and its economic and educational particularities present interesting and important questions for English Language Learning (ELL).⁴ In this marginal space, pressures test theoretical and methodological practices that are taken for granted on the outs. Because funding has been drastically reduced from its high points in the 1980s and 90s, colleges that work within these correctional spaces operate with economic margins in mind, and the cost to educate each additional offender is considered when staffing, supplies, and curricula are concerned. Despite studies that indicate that improved education is one of the most cost effective ways to reduce recidivism,⁵ legislators are reluctant to increase funding. This often means that colleges cannot afford to consider separate placement for students who on the college campus would be considered basic writers or English as Second Language (ESL) students. Space also plays a role, as even if colleges wanted to offer more or smaller classes, there may be no additional classrooms. Further, instructor availability is a factor, as instructors cannot visit an institution whenever they please, nor do they often live close to the institution, as such institutions tend to be away from large population centers. Because of factors like these, all students tend to be enrolled in the same curriculum. On the outs, this is called mainstreaming. In correctional education, it tends to be the *only way*. In Ohio, enrolling in a higher education program has more to do with offenders' correctional institutional status than their educational history. In fact, the model echoes an open admissions atmosphere. Only two educational factors determine placement: successful completion of high school or the General Educational Diploma and achieving a 12th grade proficiency on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems reading test. These guidelines are assessed and regulated by the state of Ohio through OCSS. Beyond these academic qualifications, students' behavior and sentencing play a role in their eligibility. A student cannot be longer than five years from his⁶ release date or parole board eligibility, nor can he have received more than three conduct reports within the last calendar year.

A few things are worth reflecting on before moving on: in total, these requirements represent an attempt to enforce a particular relationship between standards and access that

4. I use ELL to emphasize a broad notion of English teaching, beyond such divisions as composition or ESL.

5. See especially Daniel Karpowitz and Max Kenner's *Education as Crime Prevention: The Case for Reinstating Pell Grant Eligibility for the Incarcerated*: http://www.bard.edu/bpi/pdfs/crime_report.pdf. Within this study are links to many state recidivism figures.

6. Though I avoid pronouns where possible, some use, naturally, cannot be avoided. Because the majority of offenders are men and the institution in which I taught was for men, I will use male pronouns.

Tom Fox questions: "In the plural singular sense of the word, standards are like morals or values, you either have them or you don't . . . This plural singular sense of standards seeks essence, not contexts, seeks objectivity, not values that are contingent upon historical or material needs" (3-4). In correctional education, students either meet these criteria, or they do not. If any one standard is not met, then the student is not allowed to participate. Effectively and cumulatively, these standards

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seek to replicate, approximate, or even invent a college classroom in a space where administrators have to be concerned with educating while not appearing to grant access—a reward—to those who are kept from society because of their behavior. This tension is pervasive in correctional education. Simple syllogistic thinking fails: If a man has committed a crime, then he should be removed from society until he has served his penalty. Where, then, is the line at which the state should not provide a service? When does the service become a benefit that he does not deserve? But at

what point does bestowing a benefit create a positive return for society?

Linguistic characteristics of incarcerated students

Compared to the scholarship of other disciplines, correctional education writing and thinking is particularly thin. Much effort in the field looks towards the effects of programming on reducing recidivism, and most scholarship revolves around secondary education and the parallel goals of the offender earning a high school diploma or a GED. *The Journal of Correctional Education* leads the field as a voice of the Correctional Education Association, but pausing for a moment to consider the large number of incarcerated offenders who do not have a high school diploma or GED in the US—and thus will be mandated to enter these programs while incarcerated—professional discussion is clearly not proportional to that of other fields.⁷ Despite, or possibly because of, this marginalization, correctional and other incarcerated settings have been used to highlight classroom linguistic idiosyncrasies that cannot be approached in other settings, as questions of students' languages and institutional response

7. For an interesting take on the possibilities of critical pedagogy in the prison class, see Laura Rogers's "Finding Our Way From Within: Critical Pedagogy in a Prison Writing Class" in the spring 2008 issue of *Open Words*.

to them are framed in terms of right/wrong or allowed/disallowed. In short, incarcerated students are supposed to have fewer rights. Hui Wu describes the students' and teacher's language use in a World War II Japanese internment camp. Though the subjects of Wu's article were not guilty of any crime against the state, they were incarcerated as though they were, and school-aged students were forced to study "the democratic ideal and to discover its many implications" (243). Wu writes of Virginia Tidball, a high school English teacher at one Arkansas camp, who, "teaching with her mouth shut, deployed silence as pedagogy, likely as a political strategy as well, to provide a forum where her students were able to express their political positions openly and freely without being patronized or judged by the teacher" (253). In a setting bound and created by the government to hold a population captive, student perceptions of judgment are important. In an incarcerated setting, students have already been judged by the state as having offended in some way. Because of this, the student-teacher relationship needs to be carefully negotiated, especially as those who are being evaluated have already been adjudicated or legislated as needing to be removed from society. Here, an important linguistic sensitivity is revealed: "implement[ing] the most proper strategies for working with students means that 'teachers cannot lambaste their homes or communities or first languages'" (Kinloch as qtd. in Wu 256). This may seem overly simple to a modern teacher schooled in appreciation of difference and the importance of asking students to situate themselves, but foregrounding this is paramount when approaching students whose home community or life before incarceration can be seen as directly causing their placement in an incarcerated setting.

Paired with an awareness of the implications of an incarcerated student's home language and culture is the sense of how metaphors of cure or recovery become associated with offender-student language in correctional education. In Jane Maher's reflection on her teaching at Bedford Hills, a women's correctional institution in New York State, she notes that incarceration presents a place where offenders go to be cured of disease, addiction, and aberrant behavior. In this setting, higher education in language can be associated with a cure for the poverty that caused or fostered these problems. This

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metaphor highlights change and recovery, but Maher wonders about where this change comes in the offender-student's life: "[Mina] Shaughnessy had talked about the 'last moment'; I began to feel that these students were beyond that already precarious point in their educational careers, perhaps even in their lives" (Maher 62). The sense of and desire for change are significant, but, as centrifugal force, one that spins outward in the world, it is matched by the centripetal forces of not belonging and being unworthy of education—even being unworthy of the notion that change is possible. Maher recounts ways that these forces play out in in-class correspondence with her female students about composition experiences important to them. In the following, each paragraph is a different offender-student author:

I am going to write about my educational failures so others can be warned—no they are not my failures. I was told to take vocational classes because I am a woman. Because I am black. Because I had no one to look out for me.

I want to be in college and need writing skills for that. Please help me. My way out of this life is an education. I have to start over when I get out. Be where nobody knows me. I will have to read job ads, find an apartment, find my children.

Writing to my children's teachers. They are going to see the envelope saying the prison and the inmate box number. I don't want to bring more shame on my children but I have a right to know how they are doing. I want to know if they are getting extra help that they need. (Maher 64)

As read in these notes, much is wrapped up in language and literacy for the offender-student. Articulated in this writing are dueling senses of failure and growth. These speak of past failure and the specific skills that will allow advancement, of moving beyond a past self while negotiating ties that bind.

While I want to be careful to not paint too broad a picture of the linguistic forces at work in the incarcerated classroom, I think a few important generalities can be made. First, instructors need to be aware that the connection between language and home culture becomes complicated when the home culture carries negative associations due to the incarceration. This can easily lead to students shedding their language—and even culture—to move towards whatever is normal, law abiding, or dominant. Second, the desire to change and eventually move beyond and be released from the incarcerated space competes with the guilt associated with being confined. Often, students' desire to change their literacy and language are seen as possible cures for many of the difficulties they have had in life. This places a heavy burden on the incarcerated language classroom. It can be argued that this burden may be misplaced as addiction, poverty, or, as in the case of WWII internment camps, the federal government are forces that play a much larger role in a students' life than language and literacy. Nonetheless, students—and even administrators and policy makers—place this

importance on this space.

Considering these contexts, how, then, can ELL inform this situation? How can the approaches and scholarship in the basic writing and ESL writing fields—those areas of composition and language acquisition that most speak to the margins where these students exist in US higher education—create classrooms that interrogate these forces in ways beneficial to students, teachers, and institutions? As indicated in my beginning reflection, the incarcerated classroom with which I was faced contained many language varieties—not to mention notions of home, work, and other languages.⁸ Moreover, these students have fewer rights than students on the outs. They are positioned as wards of the state, as people who need to be monitored and regulated by the government. Perhaps more than other classroom settings, the incarcerated classroom brings to the surface questions of power and authority: teachers and administrators have it; students are lawfully kept from it. This structure compels the administrators and instructors to recognize their complicity in a linguistic discourse, of sorts. Here, Robert Phillipson's definition of linguisticism applies: "linguicism involves representation of the dominant language, to which desirable characteristics are attributed, for purposes of inclusion, and the opposite for dominated languages, for purposes of exclusion" (55). There is further relevance in Alastair Pennycook's notion that discourses become tied to a language: "on the one hand . . . discourses become in a sense entwined with language, each mutually reproducing the other; on the other, these discourses support the role of English as the bearer of this discursive weight" (8). Given these post-colonial perspectives, if the centrality of English and its privileged varieties create classrooms and curricula aligned with the negative associations of pre-incarcerated language and with notions that the only way to improve is through changing language, then a dangerous—and likely very harmful—form of linguistic imperialism is imposed, one that leaves important social, economic, cultural, and political contexts unexamined. Moreover, the assumption that changing language will improve one's situation is too simplistic. I now turn to ways that basic writing and ESL writing scholarship can inform a progressive linguistic pedagogy that increasingly questions the place of English and its dominant varieties at the core of the incarcerated classroom.

The value of a broader ELL perspective

Because questions of language power and privilege are central to composition studies, linguistics and research on second language acquisition, and the associated divisions of and distinctions between TESOL, EFL and ESL, it would appear natural that some overlap should

8. One of the more significant contact zones that offenders-students can identify is that of the courtroom or the legal arena, as this language represents the power that incarcerated them and maintains their incarceration. Within a correctional institution, offenders who can approximate legal discourse or who have collected legal

occur. It seems odd, then, that basic writing and ESL writing have not had much directly to do with each other in the history of higher education in the United States. Historically, part of this is related to the notion that disciplines do not cross, as disciplines in higher education tend to align vertically; however, language use is not something that can be vertically aligned.⁹ As Bruce Horner and John Trimbur note, the separation of English departments from foreign language departments in the late 19th century created a “territorialization” of languages (597). This move compartmentalized language study. In fact, foreign language study was seen as a way for students to better learn English. This legacy is extant today. Further complicating these language questions in the post World War II years was the increasing enrollment of students who did not speak English as a first language. Paul Matsuda notes that the first ESL writing classes emerged in the 1940s, and over the next 20 years the profession moved towards establishing itself as a separate entity (707). Further, he mentions the organizational concern that

since both composition studies and second-language studies have established their institutional identities and practices over the last three decades, attempting to consolidate the diverse practices in the two distinct professions would be unrealistic and even counterproductive. (715)

Of course, this is an organizational concern and not strictly a pedagogical one. The difference between the two seems particularly relevant in spaces where linguistic specialization is constrained by material concerns and, perhaps surprisingly, educational objectives.

While increased specialization may be important for more vertical concerns like discipline formation and decisions about which department is assigned to teach which classes on campus, it presents a significant problem for composition locations like the incarcerated classroom. In this space, a location that is likely well beyond the core concerns of its affiliated College or University, specialization is often an afterthought. In Ohio, for example, a state where every year thousands of offender students are enrolled in state funded higher education, increasing job skills and reducing recidivism are treated as the objectives of an incarcerated education. This approach leaves little room for forming an ESL or basic writing space that would allow for inquiry into language difference. The incarcerated class, then, is susceptible to reinforcing autochthonous, acontextual standards. Because it is a space where pedagogical objectives are intertwined with not re-offending—which implies changing the offender's physiology and psychology—supposed language standards and tacit monolingualism persist as a means to normalize the offender.

Though increased disciplinary division presents unique challenges to the incarcerat-

9. In composition studies, movements like writing across the curriculum and writing within the disciplines periodically go in and out of vogue. Similarly, second language writing has moved in and out of the spotlight within ELL.

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ed classroom, the high level of self awareness that marks ESL writing and basic writing can offer a way to talk back to those tensions. At the core of each field is the recognition that individual writers cannot be easily categorized and plugged into a curriculum. In reflecting on why she became involved in the initial Students' Right to Their Own Language policy statements, Geneva Smitherman recalls that

scholars had begun to question bidialectalism, as it was only "for those on the margins" and that

it was clear that the charge to intellectual activists was to struggle for the wider social legitimacy of all languages and dialects and to struggle, wherever one had a shot at being effective, to bring about mainstream recognition and acceptance of the culture, history, and language of those on the margins. (18)

Today, language scholars can be heard speaking to similar linguistic tensions. However, the question now is not one of non-standard English varieties arriving in the classroom. Rather, it is about non-English languages arriving in the classroom. In the 1970s, when the Students' Right policy committee was meeting, Smitherman remembers Richard Lloyd-Jones comment on the interdisciplinary nature of the statement: "the statement had an intellectual base in sociolinguistics, but its energy came from support of social diversity" (26). It seems today like these same interdisciplinary forces are pushing beyond varieties of English and are taking on English's largely unexamined place as the language of discourse in the modern US classroom. No longer sufficient are questions of monolithic, acontextual English; rather, world Englishes—not just British or Indian but Chinese and Mexican—and other languages need to be engaged in the classroom not just for inclusion's sake, but to recognize and move beyond English's imperialistic history in the classroom.

Further evidence of reflexivity in these fields over the last 35 years can be seen in the list of Conference on College Composition and Communication's position statements on students' languages: "Students' Right to Their Own Language," 1974, reaffirmed in 2003, and "CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers," 2001 ("CCCC Position Statements"). Similarly, among the TESOL association's many position statements are "On Language Varieties," 1996 and "On Language Rights," 2000 ("TESOL Position Statements"). While the baseline intentions for these groups align closely, practices and approaches to preparing students for academic discourse in higher education in the United States widely vary. Regard-

less of how such language policy and classroom application are debated or written about, the general tenor never seems to wander too far from the continuum articulated by Antonio Gramsci in 1935:

If one speaks (expresses oneself with words) in a manner which is historically determined by nations and linguistic areas, can one dispense with teaching this 'historically determined manner'? Granted that traditional normative grammar was inadequate, is this a good reason for teaching no grammar at all, for not being in the least concerned with speeding up the process of learning the particular way of speaking of a certain linguistic area, and rather leaving 'the language to be learnt through living it,' or some other expression of this sort. (Gramsci 283-84)

If language is a living, breathing, forever situating thing, then where do language teachers begin or end, particularly in overly normalizing spaces like the incarcerated classroom? Further, as Gramsci later asks, if certain varieties or languages represent power and indicate class, then why not encourage mobility through teaching students to speak and write as the ruling classes speak and write? After all, would not allowing for or honoring non-power language varieties be an act of keeping the non-ruling classes subjugated? Interesting, I think, to the greater ELL movement is basic writing and ESL writing's answer to this last question over the last twenty years: a resounding "no."

Here, though, the connections in an incarcerated curriculum between the dueling ideas of lessening recidivism and providing a progressive, of-the-moment pedagogy that invites questions of linguistic privilege seem strained. Perhaps there is no greater otherness mark than being removed from society as a direct result of one's actions, even required to live as an indigent class on \$20 a month. On the first day of class, I often asked my students for a literacy narrative that situated their educational and composing histories with their expectations and goals for the class ahead. I was always stopped short by the reasons why students wanted to write "correctly," even if, grammatically and stylistically, some were already writing according to Standard Academic English. Some wanted to be able to write good letters home. Some wanted be more employable. And some wanted to succeed in their other course work. Of course, these responses could be attributed to students asserting the narrative of

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the curious, willing student, but I took away something more significant from this. Nearly all students began by positioning themselves as less than, some even asserting their "blank-slatedness" or their "empty canvas-ness." Regardless of an offender student's history, adjudication and

incarceration tends to stigmatize all that has come before, including much of their lives. Learning composition in an incarcerated space is not just a way to overcome subjugation, if that is at all possible. For offender students, it is a way for them to create a more perfect vision of themselves, a vision that when created from autochthonous values serves to reinforce their otherness. The imperative for instructors, it would seem, is to foster an appreciation for language differences while providing a space that allows offender students to interrogate those areas of their discursive formations that have been detrimental—or even malicious. I use “malicious” quite intentionally here, as discussions of violence and harm that languages (and bodies) can do are not abstractions in a correctional setting. Inevitably, when class discussion turns towards any particular violence, offender students will invoke the mantra, “It’s not about the past. It’s about the future.” While this may offer certain psychological comfort for the student, it adds no real substance to concerns that are very much about the past, particularly linguistic patterns and thinking.

The question for modern teachers, especially those informed by post-colonial linguists like Phillipson and Pennycook, is how do you create a classroom that balances the particular tensions of existing, working, and thinking within an incarcerated space, a student’s right to his own language, and the study and application of progressive rhetorical and grammatical conventions? Modern composition theorists like Victor Villanueva revisit Gramsci’s tension, which may be particularly relevant to the incarcerated classroom:

In what [students] produce in the classroom, perhaps, they come to know more about an inequitable system, come to know—consciously and explicitly—that there is a dominant language and a dominant set of ways with that language that reflect power relations. And in that knowing, the students might consider change. (29)

Similarly, the disciplines within the greater second language acquisition field seem to be working through similar questions. B. Kumaravadivelu notes that TESOL took a similar critical turn in the 1990s, and that “it [was] probably one of the last academic disciplines in the field of humanities and social sciences to go critical” (70). Like composition’s critical turn, the critical turn in TESOL

is about realizing that language learning and teaching is more than learning and teaching language. It is about creating the cultural forms and interested knowledge that give meaning to the lived experiences of teachers and learners. (70)

In turn, each field’s critical conscience presents an approach that foregrounds discussions of power and language. These questions of language power and privilege seem to have come to the fore when other questions seem to be answered (or regarded as unanswerable). In basic writing, Mike Rose’s 1988 landmark overview of cognitive research on basic writers seemingly closed the door on cognitive theories of basic writers’ language use

because these theories "avert or narrow our gaze from the immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes: the rich interplay of purpose, genre, register, textual convention, and institutional expectation" (48). Just as composition seemed to be moving away from questions of development, ESL seemed to open the door to these questions. In 1993, Tony Silva called for L2 writing specialists to "look beyond L1 writing theories to better describe the unique nature of L2 writing, to look into the potential sources (e.g., cognitive, developmental, social, cultural, educational, linguistic) of this uniqueness" (201). Similarly, Valdes observes that

work carried out from a number of directions argues for a perspective on second language writing that takes into account what we know about basic skilled writers who are native speakers of English, that attempts to understand in what ways second language writers are different from these native language writers, and that looks closely at the actual writing process of second language learners as they write. (51)

Kumaravadivelu observes three major shifts in the last 25 years of TESOL scholarship: "(a) from communicative language teaching to task-based language teaching, (b) from method-based pedagogy to postmethod pedagogy, and (c) from systemic discovery to critical discourse" (60). Each of these shifts represents a move away from an autonomous, a-contextual sense of literacy and learning and towards a more progressive and contextually based pedagogy.

Beyond the progressive pedagogical turns that basic writing and ESL writing are making, the way that both fields approach the status of the English language is important to consider. This is especially true for the incarcerated space that naturally assumes the privilege of a variety of English that can best be described as non-incarcerated English. That is, language status is derived from the subjective position of the person who is speaking. If that person is an offender, then he has no status. This is complicated, of course, when an offender student's language is a non-privileged variety of English or another language entirely. While critiquing English's position is certainly implied in the approaches outlined above, questioning English's largely unexamined place as the language of discourse in modern US higher education is becoming increasingly relevant. As Horner and Trimbur note,

at a point when many North Americans hold it self-evident that English is already or about to be the global lingua franca, we need to ask some serious questions about the underlying sense of inevitability in this belief—and about whose English and whose interests it serves. (624)

Important to this discussion is the need to shed the myth of competence: "we are hesitant to use the term competence to describe a speaker's language, since what constitutes language competence is itself arbitrary and continually subject to negotiation and redefini-

tion" (612). Many of these myths, including the myth of a monolithic, practicable standard language, seem to be eroding within the composition classroom as world Englishes enter and force teachers and scholars to interrogate the linguistic structures in which—and values with which—they operate.

As a supplement to this progressive linguistic turn, however, I want to highlight an ESL pedagogical metaphor that seeks to transform an approach to the social, political, and economic examinations of language: the learning community. Increasingly, the positioning of the classroom is important to what takes place in the classroom, and this may have special relevance to the incarcerated classroom. Correctional institutions are violent places, and offenders are reluctant to expand their social circle beyond race, age, or where they live within the institution. Because of this, the classroom presents a setting that disrupts the safe, homogenous space that many offenders have so carefully and intentionally tried to create. The learning community metaphor, then, has obvious implications for the incarcerated classroom. For instance, in *Dialogic Approaches to TESOL: Where the Ginkgo Tree Grows*, Shelley Wong notes the history of learning communities and the important, though largely assumed, role that they have played in eastern and western educational traditions. First, she looks to Socrates' method of inquiry, "maieutic, from the art of midwifery" (42). She recalls that it is "through questioning [that] the student gave birth to concepts and understandings that were already in his mind" (42).

Her eastern example is Confucius and his effort to "influence society and bring about cultural reforms" (44). Central to Confucius' thinking was "ren," or "learn[ing] to be an ethical person" or "to learn to be human" (45). Put together, the dialogic learning in community follows the best in each tradition:

"Community" implies a gathering of people who have long-term commitment to being together. "Learning" entails cognitive changes or the development of thought. "Learning in community" means that the cognitive changes come about because of relationships between people. "Dialogic" suggests communication—the reciprocal use of language. "Dialogic learning in community," then, implies that through talking

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and listening within the context of enduring relationships, cognitive changes take place. (48-49)

In the classroom, this is manifest in two ways. First, the language classroom should be seen as a community. This means that the teacher should create a space where no student is excluded or separated, "particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized by their race, gender, ethnic, social, and economic class" (53). The second way to approach learning in community is to create spaces for students to learn from communities outside the class: "a dialogic curriculum draws from both kinds of communities to expose students to diverse experiences, perspectives, and voices" (53).

Another significant re-vision of classroom community is found in Judith Rodby's work. Rodby turns to anthropologist and performance theorist Victor Turner's metaphor of "communitas" as a way to analyze the "relationship of marginals, outsiders, and liminars to social processes and social structures" (82). Rodby is centrally concerned by the false dichotomy between the classroom and the real world:

The ESL literacy class should be seen as a whole in which the processes of social interaction, language acquisition (redefined as language appropriation), and reading and writing are dialectically related. If acquisition of standard English is seen as the privileged goal of the class . . . writing or composing is likely to be perceived by student and teacher alike as a practice activity as a "language exercise" rather than as a "social activity." (81-82)

As a way to move from exercise and towards a more authentic social activity, Rodby advocates for ESL classrooms to be consciously constructed on the boundaries and to consider the students as "liminars." By planning and inviting students to deliberately enter into this classroom space, "the outsiders become involved in a social process . . . which may give rise to communitas" (83). Rodby posits characteristics of this space. First, "the class should experience not only a spontaneous but normative communitas which is not random or unexpected, but routine, developed as part of the ongoing relations of the course" (92). She offers as an example students evaluating their own learning, collaborative activities that force students out of a passive role, and even allowing students to take part in daily activities like attendance, announcements or larger tasks like assignment creation or reading selection to infuse these things with a sense of group ritual. These processes break down barriers and power structures of daily life and free the group from conformity to the artificial, exercise-like nature of the language class. This approach to a classroom community—a notion that seems to be particularly articulated in ESL writing scholarship—encourages a classroom that treats language as the critical turn would intend; namely, as a living, breathing, continuously situated activity.

The incarcerated composition classroom would do well to be shaped by these traditions. An effective incarcerated learning community must first disrupt the offender student's local context, which is homogenized by a reaction to expected violence. The classroom should not only be framed as a safe space, but it should be framed as different from the dynamics at play in the rest of the institution. Further, the class-as-learning-community should be consciously situated within its institutional context. That is, it should not be set up to be a space that extends the harmful, counter-productive thinking that asserts learning the language (and values) of the non-incarcerated will somehow lead to an improved life; rather, it should be set up as a place that reflexively interrogates language choices and the way that those choices (in)form identity and whatever change may be possible in their lives.

Conclusions: Towards a progressive ELL classroom

I wish I could say that I was able to guide that first class at London with these things in mind. I know that I did not. At the time, there was too much to consider and take in. Entering a prison for the first time is an overwhelming experience, and entering a prison to educate for the first time is even more so. As I began to understand the nature of incarcerated education and my place in it in the years that followed, however, it became clear to me that substantive change for those who are incarcerated requires a rehabilitated correctional system. Educational programming offered by states is set up to fail when alternative life and language choices presented in the classroom remain secondary to surviving and existing while incarcerated. The questions that the incarcerated classroom's instructor is left with, then, are can these discussions from the margins of composition scholarship inform a pedagogy relevant to students whose bodies have been labeled as less than? Can this interdisciplinary legitimization of non-standard varieties of English and non-English languages in the composition classroom work within an incarcerated space? In many ways, this move away from a monolithic sense of right-and-wrong-language seems ideal for education within an imperialized space like that of a correctional institution. Further, approaching the classroom as a learning community, a space that embraces and makes conscious its liminality and the ways that the class works within itself and out into the world, may allow for a vital separation between the violence of the institution

"Perhaps more than most students, incarcerated students need to negotiate a failed past with a hopeful future."

and the normalizing values of incarceration in the United States. Perhaps more than most students, incarcerated students need to negotiate a failed past with a hopeful future. Offenders need to recognize how their lives interact or (re)connect with society, and one way to arrive at some understanding is through a progressive language classroom where, as Villanueva suggests,

students discover that they are constantly in tension with their environments and that these environments are affected by social, political, and economic circumstances and events. Personal lives must contend with social, political, and economic situations. (29)

This move, however, should not be mistaken as accommodating—or certainly condoning—offender students' pasts; rather, this turn allows for change through the conflict created by and within these contended spaces. This move also attempts to bridge the binary between privileged language varieties and critical approaches asserted by Gramsci. It creates a critical communal space through which students can study how power is tied to language, and it affords students agency in their language choices.

Before moving away from these tensions, I would like to spend a few moments framing my concluding thoughts through Frantz Fanon's thinking on the dynamics at work between the minority—the black slave—and the majority—the white master—as a way to approximate the thoughts of an imperialized subject. In *Black Skin/White Masks*, Fanon differentiates between the slavery abolition experiences of the French Negro and the American Negro:

The upheaval reached the [French] Negroes from without. The black man was acted upon. Values that had not been created by his actions, values, that had not been born of the systolic tide of his blood, danced in a hued whirl around him. The upheaval did not make a difference in the Negro. . . . [T]he American Negro is cast in a different play. In the United States, the Negro battles and is battled. There are laws that, little be little, are invalidated under the Constitution. . . . And we can be sure that nothing is going to be given for free. (220-21)

I think that this violent, corporeal metaphor is apt for the linguistically sophisticated offender student. Here, Fanon contends that struggle created a more true liberation for the American slave. In this formulation of the master/slave dialectic, action against resistance educates while it frees, while being granted freedom instills passivity or, at the very least, creates a less transforming, a less significant change. Similarly, I have contended here that it is necessary to instill in a curriculum resistance to an easy, automatic waving of not just English privilege, but of the normalizing, corrective forces of incarceration. Without confronting—and in some ways inviting—linguistic tension into the classroom, students'

languages and their perceptions are acted upon. As Fanon notes, "to educate man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act" (222). I think that the progressive, community oriented model creates an actional space through which incarcerated students can struggle through and interrogate language(s) and their situation as incarcerated bodies.

Put together, the progressive examination of language within social, economic, and political contexts, Wong's notion of a dialogic community both within and outside of the classroom, and Rodby's embracing of the language learner's liminality create a space that seems to accommodate the main concerns of the imperialized, incarcerated students' complicated relationship to language. I do not want to imply that a classroom that derives its practice from this theory will solve all of the problems and associations of an incarcerated language student. I think, however, that the extraordinary circumstances within which these students often find themselves demand approaches that are informed by multiple perspectives, let alone disciplines. Certainly, I do not want to advocate blithely crossing the attributes of one group with another. There are already enough stereotypes that are hard to be rid of, and, concerning language, treating students as homogeneous or generalized groups is largely unproductive. What often is found by the scholar and the teacher, however, is that holding up a mirror to a discipline, the university, or to the classroom, often reveals that the problem is not with the students: it is with the structure or culture—of which we, as ELL teachers and scholars, are complicit.

Here, Gramsci's thinking on language is once again echoed:

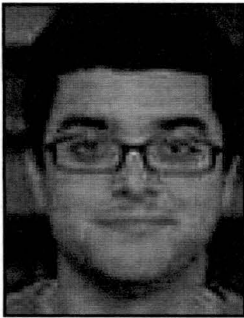
Every time the question of the language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony. (282)

In the case of the incarcerated classroom, questions of language are not the primary problem; rather, these questions come to the fore because language is something that students, administrators, and teachers believe that they can grab hold of and have some influence on. Through an examination of and move to change offender-students' language—and their corresponding cultures, histories, and even offenses—the criminal justice system can say that it is helping the poor, troubled inmate overcome his many (non-linguistic) deficiencies. While this expectation may seem sufficient for popular understandings of criminal justice and composition, it hardly measures up for those who expect more from both.

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Joseph Burzynski is a second-year composition and rhetoric Ph.D. student at Miami University. From 2005-2008 he directed and instructed in Urbana University's business certificate program at London Correctional Institution in London, OH. His primary research area explores ways that writing cultures are conceived on college campuses, and he is currently working on a project that examines organized labor's house call.