

but she continued: “They sounded off and my first impulse was to suggest changes to them. But after I thought through the logic behind them, I could perfectly understand why you chose the formulations you did. They were correct; I could not correct them. They were simply your style.” It would add a nice flourish to finish this essay with an assertion that what she called my style was a trace of my Polish flair, but I will actually never know which sentences sounded unusual, because she did not mark them; and I will never read like a native speaker, even though I try to write like one. When I read a review berating Arundhati Roy’s sentence fragments or Salman Rushdie’s puns or hear my students complain about Joseph Conrad’s syntax, I know they still have to learn to read for that other level of logic. Reading across stylistic differences is an exercise in comprehension across cultural boundaries; at its best, it makes us sensitive to different ways of thinking. What is gained in translations such as mine, then, is not only the paradox of an accent audible in writing, but also the opportunity to engage with an other.

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Bimbisar Irom: Writing in from the outside: Reflections on the “Oh No! Syndrome” and writing pedagogy from a non-native teacher

This essay is intended to reflect on the experiences of non-native speaker teachers of English (commonly referred to as NNSTs by linguists and educationalists) in the writing classroom in the United States. Although the essay contains many of my observations as a teacher of writing in the United States, my hope is to leap beyond the personal to provide some insights that might prove useful, both for native and non-native teachers, in negotiating the terrain we call the writing classroom. I am

primarily interested in arguing that the writing classroom and the attendant practices of writing pedagogy and the exchange of writing (produced by both the students and the non-native teachers) function as paradoxical and productive sites in which the perceived lack of oral skills of the non-native teacher is simultaneously revealed and that lack is contested and overcome. In other words, the writing classroom provides space for a practice that might successfully confront the uncritical assumptions behind the native/non-native teacher dichotomy—a division that, I might add, serves as an ideological buffer for real inequalities within and outside the academic world—by the demonstration of the shared commonality of the issues that writers face across cultures. The writing classroom and the practice of teaching writing, then, become a useful arena wherein issues of cultural distance, unfamiliar accents, and the gap between oral proficiency and writing proficiency can be explored.

I am defining writing interaction in the classroom environment rather broadly to include teacher responses to student papers and assignments, student-teacher interaction through emails, class notes and collaboration in both online and traditional classroom formats. I might here add the qualification that the place of the non-native teacher in the composition classroom differs slightly from her location in literature classes. The literature classroom is more perceptibly defined and specialized in the sense that there already is a focus on content and the particular skills that students must master—such as close-reading and the analysis of the images, metaphors, and symbols of literary texts. In comparison, the non-native teacher in the composition classroom is in a much more precarious position of teaching the language of the native to the native students.

In exploring these pedagogical practices as a non-native teacher, I am also wary of subscribing to an unexamined ethics of “multicultural teaching” (again, an uncritical assumption) that might lead to the dilution of and distraction from the purpose of the *writing* classroom, which is to demonstrate and teach the technologies of effective academic writing as a communicative tool. While the concept of multicultural teaching—rather loosely defined as the importance and urgency of approaching a text from varied cultural perspectives—might work well in some other avenues for learning, I must caution against employing it uncritically in the writing classroom. My claim is that, rather than dissolving the class into a melee of native informants, the writing classroom will serve its purposes better if the teacher is aware of and holds intact a productive and permanent tension between the rooted locations of the participants in the class (the varied cultural experiences they bring to the content) and the shared burden of writing (the form that is being taught). In short, writing pedagogy is more effective if understood and communicated as both a transcultural and a multicultural weapon. This is not to argue against the fact that different cultures have different ways and styles of writing, but rather to insist on maintaining a pliable traffic between the particular claims of the student writers and the technology of academic writing.

In his article “The Writing Lesson” in *The New York Times*, Stanley Fish has argued vehemently for the idea that the composition classroom should focus strictly on teaching the formal rules of writing and pay less attention to the content of the texts that are read and employed in the classroom. Fish even goes on to claim that

“content is always the enemy of writing instruction.” This tussle between content and form in the writing classroom is an important political question, for what gets validated as correct form is, after all, sanctified as such by the dominant group. But to subscribe to a wholly decentralized multicultural approach in the teaching of writing in order to resist the political dominant does not adequately prepare the students to confront the inequalities of the world. As Fish argues in “What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3,” another article in the same series: “You’re not going to be able to change the world if you are not equipped with the tools that speak to its present condition. You don’t strike a blow against a power structure by making yourself vulnerable to its prejudices.” The non-native teacher in the writing classroom has a crucial role to play in striking a delicate and much-needed balance between equipping the students with the accepted writing forms of the culture and allowing space for contesting those very norms from an efferent multicultural perspective.

I have been teaching English literature and writing for 11 years or so beginning in India and the last 6 of those years have been in the United States. As is common experience among graduate students in English Ph.D. programs, quite a few of the classes I have taught were Freshman Composition invested in teaching students the rigors of writing deemed acceptable in the U.S. academia. The teaching of writing is not a common academic practice in my home country and it would probably be hard to find schools there that require mandatory freshman composition classes. What that meant to me as a non-native teacher was that I underwent a series of psychic migrations (in addition to the physical one) across an academic culture that does not offer expository writing courses to another culture that makes it a mandatory requirement for college proficiency. In many ways, non-native teachers have a peculiar relationship with writing classes, especially if those classes are some of the first courses they teach in the United States. The required retooling of practice and pedagogy in the writing classroom is most often coextensive with the struggle to carve a renewed self, to adjust to a new life in the U.S., thus making the classroom practice a witness and testament to that process of adjustment, reflection, reorientation, and even resistance.

Among the varied issues that non-native teachers of English face in the language and writing classrooms, the perceived lack of oral skills is a major point of contention. The native students’ responses to this perceived lack of fluency has often been referred to as the “Oh No! Syndrome;” the syndrome naming and verbalizing the students’ initial dismay at being taught the rigors of writing in their native language by a non-native teacher. The writing classroom and the demonstration of effective writing pedagogy can counter this perceived lack of fluency, obviously not by the non-native teacher mimicking the native accent and demonstrating ‘native fluency,’ but by revealing that writing is a processual technology that must be learned and mastered by the investment of time and effort. While the perceived lack of oral proficiency cannot be resolved in any meaningful way within the writing classroom—unless the interlocutor comes to recognize and understand that English is a global language which makes it vulnerable to inflection with different accents and that this ‘corruption’ and vulnerability is precisely what makes it global—the focus on the practice of writing in the classroom enables some of these issues to

be addressed. The teaching of writing can be a tool to answer back (write back?) against the problematic assumptions about non-native teachers.

If the teaching of writing is to enable what we call ‘teachable moments,’ then a focus on the demonstration of the shared commonality of writing across cultures is a key factor. In other words, revealing and discussing the *techné* involved in writing could be a primary source by which some of the gaps induced by different oral traditions are resolved and bridged over. These could be techniques as basic as demonstrating how the clarity of thesis statements and topic sentences is necessary for successful argumentative and academic writing in most languages (or in all versions of English). Such a demonstration of the transcultural facets of writing extends Walter J. Ong’s claim that there “is no way to write ‘naturally’” to include the suppressed fact that there is no way to write “natively” either, or that we subscribe to several “nativities” and “ethnicities” and “regionalisms” when we write (82). We might have been made to subscribe to the popular and powerful notion of the unified and unitary native speaker and the attendant myth of authenticity and genuineness, but the writing classroom and the demonstration of writing as *techné* drives a deep wedge between the ideological claims of the native speaker and the native writer. Indeed, the writing classroom of the non-native teacher can be employed to expose the native writer as an ideological construct by stressing on the rhetorical and the discursive aspects of writing and reading rather than the linguistic. To quote Kanavillil Rajagopalan, the

specific tasks of reading and writing are not tied to this or that language, but an expertise that cuts across language boundaries. As a matter of fact, they are better classified as *discursive* or *rhetorical* rather than *linguistic* skills, properly speaking—they are linguistic only to the extent that they are carried out in and through language; but they are rhetorical for the reason we can ill afford to ignore, viz., that they are acquired by means of years and years of practice. (297)

In short, focusing on writing as a technology serves a double goal—it teaches students the subject they have come to learn, while also disrupting the ideological logic that a native speaker is necessarily a competent writer. In fact, the specific practices employed by the non-native teacher in the writing classroom questions the validity of the existence of the native writer.

While focusing on the teaching of writing as a technology, non-native teachers should, however, be especially aware that abandoning the communicative approach in teaching that emphasizes oral interaction will prove counterproductive. Instead of yielding a hoped-for fracture in the problematic location of the non-native teaching writing to native speakers, ignoring the communicative approach will instead add to the perceived gap and reinstall the non-native as not having gained enough oral proficiency. One of the simple but effective techniques I employed during my initial semesters teaching Freshman Composition enables a pliable traffic between the communicative method and the focus on teaching writing as a technology. This was to make proficient use of the blackboard. I accessed and resorted to using the

blackboard whenever I perceived a disjunction between my (mis)pronunciation of a particular word and what the students would have expected to hear from a native speaker. Not only did this gesture induce clarity by spelling out what I meant, it also proved to be a simple and encapsulated demonstration of the ways in which writing in general (as demonstrated on the blackboard) can be a means for bridging the real gap stemming from different oral traditions.

Most of the specific pedagogical practices that prove to be strengths in the non-native teacher's armor emerge from her own experience of migrations across cultures and her ability to read and write competently in two or more languages. What I call the comparative pedagogy practiced by the non-native writing teacher is distinctive and separate from the one practiced by the monolingual native speaker in that she is constantly mining and burrowing through the complex intermesh and palimpsest of her experiences and languages to come up with the best possible way of communicating a thought, of phrasing a sentence, of teaching a language.

Let me elaborate the possibilities inherent in this comparative pedagogy with an example. My first language is a tonal language wherein pitch and tone are employed as fundamental parts of speech that radically change the meanings of words. Tone is the use of pitch in language to distinguish lexical or grammatical meaning—that is, to distinguish or inflect words. Pitch is used in all languages to express emotional and other paralinguistic information, and to convey emphasis, contrast, and other such features in what is called a process of intonation. But the tonal language takes this intonation several steps further to distinguish words or their inflections. I am claiming that, as the speaker of a tonal language, I am already aware of the crucial role of the audience and my interlocutor. This is because I have always had to intone and pitch my words carefully to communicate the right meaning to the specific audience. The process of rhetoricity, of attaining the right pitch, has already been internalized into my communicative persona, even if initially and only as an oral skill.

In contrast to my tonal native language, the writing skills that I teach in the classroom belong to a stress language or a non-tonal language where pitch does not have the same functions. English as a stress language uses tone and pitch to convey a change in emotion or attitude and tone and pitch play a much more limited role. But by drawing on my oral training and expertise in a tonal language and the rhetoricity already internalized, I am drawing on widely divergent linguistic traditions in the writing classroom to teach the significance of audience and context and the role they play in the persuasiveness of argument. My practice as a non-native teacher, then, not only cuts across languages but also commandeers the lessons of orality to teach the technology of the written word.

The effectiveness of the non-native teacher in the writing classroom lies not only in the fact that she can draw upon her experiences with varied languages. What is generally perceived as a liability for the non-native teacher—her alien status constantly marked by an unfamiliar accent—can also be employed in the service of an effective pedagogical practice. Because the non-native teacher already functions within a space that spotlights her alien status, she brings to the writing classroom a hypercritical awareness of fundamental rhetorical concepts such as audience and context. The non-native's positions as a permanent outsider makes

her always alert to the possibility that her utterances might be misconstrued if they are not correctly phrased, grammatically worded, and idiomatically sound. This hyperawareness is a critical tool in the writing classroom and can be employed in an effective pedagogical manner. For instance, the non-native teacher is always haunted by the spectral anxiety of these questions: am I being heard/understood/interpreted correctly? How should I say/utter/write in the best possible manner that I might be understood correctly? Did I say it right? These questions of orality can have a direct bearing on the pedagogical practice of the non-native teacher in the writing classroom. The anxieties that stem from constantly being made aware of an oral lack can be channeled into an effective practice by transferring them into issues of audience awareness and context. These are not questions that the monolingual native teachers face in the classroom and my claim is that the critical practice of the non-native teacher can transform these liabilities into strengths.

The pedagogy of the non-native teacher can, therefore, bring to the writing classroom a distinctive and productive tension between issues of form and content and make critical use of the elements of rhetoricity already internalized and assimilated through the non-native teacher's first language. In occupying a space between the requirements of the academic culture dictated by the dominant culture and the located perspectives that the students bring into the writing classroom, the non-native teacher can serve as a valuable pedagogical and political tool in the interests of an educative enterprise that must always question received wisdom.

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