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Assessing the Writing of International Learners:
Sue Norton and **Marty Meinardi** present a discussion in two voices.

Tyrone, Lie Gong, Allessandro and me by Sue Norton

Evaluating the writing of a culturally or ethnically mixed group can be awkward. Some years ago I was teaching a creative writing course to a group of inner city, mostly African-American high school students in Jersey City, New Jersey. They were on a pre-college summer programme designed to expose them to campus life. The module they were taking was similar to what is known in the States as *Freshman Composition*. We would do a group reading of a selected essay or poem, and the students would be asked to develop its theme in a writing of their own. There were varying degrees of interest and indifference within the group, some of the students wanting very much to do things well and get things right.

On the day that I described their first assignment to them, someone asked me how much attention I would be giving to 'the way the sentences go', by which I knew she meant the grammar, syntax, punctuation and spelling. I talked a bit about first drafts and said that, for now, I wanted them to pay attention to their ideas, listen to their inner voices, and just enjoy the experience of putting their thoughts on paper. I added that there would be time later on – and I remember my words exactly – to go over the work with a fine-toothed comb. Someone promptly asked, *'What that mean?'*, to which Tyrone from the back of the room retorted, *'That mean she gonna comb the afro out of it.'*

I laughed, I can tell you, but the comment gave me pause. What he was suggesting, in his cleverly metaphorical way, was that when I helped them to edit their work, I would be sure to standardise their grammar, 'straighten out' their writing, and thus bleach away their personalities.

So much research has, of course, been carried out on when and whether to teach both native speakers of non-standard English and non-native speakers of English to adopt 'standard' conventions of English in their writing. So much research has been carried out, but so little is it helpful when one is standing at the front of a classroom *knowing* that to impose standard-English restrictions on one's learners' writing is to both cramp their style and stigmatise their version of English if it is in any way rule-governed.

So, wanting to be as liberating and, what the heck, as politically correct a presence as I can be for my students, these days I sometimes begin class sessions with brief forays into discussions on the validity of 'international Englishes', 'the rule-bound nature of dialects', and the culturally determined attributes inherent in all writing behaviours. I teach degree level English to international students in Dublin now, so they have the maturity to engage in such discussions that my former high school students, naturally enough, did not. And while I may sometimes succeed in getting my current students to understand that I don't wish to neutralise their writing (or to 'Anglicise' it), I nevertheless have a responsibility to help them achieve clarity in – how shall I say? -- a broad sense.

But I often find myself in some linguistic tight corners. Take, for example, this couple of sentences from a Chinese student doing our final year course called *Rhetoric and Critical Thinking*. The assignment related to whether doctors should ever lie to their patients, and he tells of a time when he and his family and their doctor agreed to deceive his dying grandfather about the severity of his illness. He writes:

'None of us wanted to let him in a mood of despair. Just at the time he was going to the better world, he told us that he had a feeling about how severe his illness was but he really did not want to know too much about it because hope against hope that he would like to recover, and that was the reason why he did not seek the real answer when he was in invalidism.'

Though only one paragraph long, this passage invites comment in a variety of ways. It contains errors of punctuation and of grammar. It contains several disfluencies, such as the awkward integration of what was probably a recently-acquired phrase, *hope against hope*, and the dubious word *invalidism*. But it contains as well a phrase that suggests a vaguely Eastern bias in expressing the notion of life after death, ie *going to the better world*. As the trusted authority who is assessing this piece of writing, I feel I must ask myself if suggesting to the writer alternate ways of phrasing would constitute a kind of linguistic imperialism. Or is it a rightful part of my remit to enable my non-native writers of English to 'Anglicise', and in this instance 'Westernise,' their writing? I just don't know.
Here is another example of culturally idiosyncratic writing from one of my first-year Italian students. He is reflecting on the post-9/11 world:

'World was in mourning after disastrous facts of New York and I felt close grief to all civil people. My family and I felt big apprehension for the tragic verdict that proclaimed the number of lost lives. Since the Iraq war began, I share once more the sorrow of the families that have lost their darlings in this horrendous violence.'

I suppose this is the type of writing that lay-people often refer to as 'broken English'. And one might be tempted to 'repair' it, if it weren't so heart-felt. But to tamper with it in any way would really be to sacrifice something. No doubt this student used his best thesaurus-English and came up with phrases like *big apprehension*, meaning, I suppose, *great anxiety*. His use of the word proclaimed would sound stilted if written by a native speaker, but yet didn't we all wait in a grief-induced stupor for a final tragic figure to be – there's no other word for it – *proclaimed* in the days after 9/11? His lexical choice makes perfect sense in this light. And as to the families *that have lost their darlings*, well, who would argue? For him, *darlings* means, simply, *loved ones*. At the very most, I'd gently replace his typically Italian *that* with a *who*. But I would feel like the worst kind of quibbler.
And as my classes in Dublin are composed of a mix of nationalities, I can only rarely isolate typical 'errors' (such as the Italian *that* for *who*) and treat them en masse. So with each new assignment, I find myself in a line-by-line quandary about what to change, what to leave as is, what to write *usage?* next to, how often to relocate a modifier, how often to transpose pairs of nouns and adjectives. With each new assignment, I sit with red pen in hand hoping to aid intelligibility without blighting personality.
Fortunately I have a colleague researching International Englishes …

Tyrone, Lie Gong, Allessandro and a fair deal

by Marty Meinardi

A knowledge of English will get you around the world. But is it as easy as that? It seems that just being able to express yourself in the English language only gets you so far. As has been suggested earlier, a learner's writing will, in most cases, only be assessed positively if it adheres to a standard norm. And it is this standard norm that opens the door to a wider world: the one of academia, successful careers and business opportunities.

Hamp-Lyons, for example, remarks that writing in the English language *'… remains a "good" that greatly influences access to many, even, most, other "goods" in the twenty-first-century world. This makes the assessment of writing an implicitly political act.'*

Her idea would, therefore, imply that if we, as teachers, do not supply our learners (whether native speakers or non-native speakers) with a standard of English writing that is universally accepted, they will be judged to be of a lesser calibre than those who do use standard English. The political act, as Hamp-Lyons calls it, of assessing students' writing can turn into an act of exclusion.

But what about the idea of English as a global language and the questions of who really owns English, and who sets the standard norm? It has long been mooted that there are several 'Englishes', and that one type of English should not be preferred over another. African-American English is one such type where both oral and written language are socio-culturally influenced. If one argues that this style of English language is as valid as, for example, 'standard' Australian English or 'standard' British English, it should therefore follow that students writing in their own culturally determined vernacular should not be castigated for a style of writing that is truly their own. If Hamp-Lyons' premise is true, that 'good' English is now an economic necessity for acquiring status in the world, then helping students communicate their ideas effectively is surely a good thing. But is taking the student's ego out of the writing also a good thing? If we seek to 'standardise' their writing, are we, as teachers and assessors, nullifying our students' own creative personas, which have in turn been inspired by their cultural backgrounds, their life experiences, and their socio-economic and geographical roots?

Myles makes the observation that *'the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments'*. To take away the idiosyncratic background of a writer's skill is akin to doing away with the friendly corner shop in favour of a face-less supermarket.

But this sentiment is valid only if we can agree that individuality does, in fact, score points in today's society. Certainly one could be forgiven for wondering if communications that are idiosyncratic and novel are as likely to be heard as standardised messages that everyone understands. What skills are more likely to be of benefit to students: creativity and individuality, or conformity to accepted norms and standards? Epps has gone so far as to allege that a '*wholesale slaughter of Afro-Americans is taking place [in the US] every day! … The minds of black students are being robbed and mugged on a daily basis because they are not being taught to read and write so that they can determine the course of their own lives'*. And even if we agree, at least in principle, with this extreme view, how exactly can we establish a norm by which to assess our students?

Researchers such as Brumfit have pointed out that *'… in foreign language teaching, learners are forced to express a culture of which they have scarcely any experience'*.

It follows, then, that in their writing, foreign students will make reference to their own cultural frameworks. All writers' thoughts are formed by social context. If personalities are, in effect, ironed out of written work, well, it can scarcely be 'owned' by those who wrote it. So, in a class such as *Rhetoric and Critical Thinking,* students may not only be confronted with a new language in which to communicate, but also with rhetorical organisations and strategies that may be alien to them. Alptekin notes that

'writers not only construct mental representations of their socially acquired knowledge, but such schematic knowledge also influences their writing in various areas such as the rhetorical organization of a text, audience awareness, topical priorities, etc. Numerous studies in contrastive rhetoric demonstrate how thinking and writing operate in terms of culture-specific schemas.'

We owe our students the best of both worlds. Why not allow them, even encourage them in, their culturally specific ways of writing in English? I would argue that to do so is pedagogically sound as long as we also alert them, and alert them often, to the need for contextually appropriate forms of writing that will help them to access the opportunities they desire. What our students need are both writing 'egos' and writing 'alter-egos'. As teachers, we can nurture both. Myles, for instance, suggests that students try to take on *'… another persona, such as replacing their birth name with an English one … to become more immersed in the target language and culture'*. But when we wish to help our students write spontaneously and creatively, using their own culturally influenced voices, we might ask them to write about things they know, about topics with which they are familiar, about things that take them *home*.

In such ways, our students can make progress in both styles of writing and, in time, invoke each as needed. As bilinguals and biculturals, they will have enviable access to two linguistic worlds. With their individualities intact and their writing skills adaptable, both can be their oysters.

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