

Tutoring Multilingual Students: Shattering the Myths

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The increasing linguistic and cultural diversification of North America has resulted in large numbers of multilingual students attending college and university and seeking curricular and extracurricular support with reading and writing (Ruecker, 2011; Teranishi, C. Suárez-Orozco, & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2011). In the past, learning and writing centers hired “ESL specialists” to provide support. But this model, given the ubiquity of multilingual students in higher education today, is no longer sustainable. Instead, all tutors must learn the skills necessary to support the academic literacy development of these writers, and that means that the way tutors are trained must change. Because the lived reality of the majority of tutors (and center administrators) is monolingual (Bailey, 2012; Barron & Grimm, 2002), examining the myths generally held about multi-lingual students is essential to both our development as tutors and the development of our students as academic readers and writers of English. Only after raising critical awareness about these “misguided ideas” will training specific to tutoring multilingual students make sense and be put into practice (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008, p. 117).

In this article, I present and challenge myths about multilingual writers and myths about how to tutor them.

Myths about Multilingual Writers

In tutor training, the first myths to be examined are those about language, language learning, and multilingual writers themselves: What are their identities, their literacy skills, the ways they have learned the English language and its written form, and their current needs as writers?

Myth #1: Multilingual Students Are a Uniform Group

Unfortunately, “ESL” has become a label for any and all English learners (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). But there is no such thing as “typical” multilingual students. Multilingual students include international students who speak English as a foreign language, visa students who speak a World English variety, recent immigrants from non-English speaking countries, and long-term residents, also known as “Generation 1.5 students” (Thonus, 2003).

For international students, English is a foreign language, rarely heard or read outside compulsory English classes in their primary and secondary schools. On the other hand, students originating in countries colonized by Britain and the United States, where English has some official status (45+ nations, including India and the Philippines), are multilingual native speakers and writers of “new” or “World” English variations. They speak and write localized varieties with “indigenous” language norms, distinct from standard British or American English, and may have been schooled entirely in that variety of English (Kachru & Nelson, 1996).

Another group comprises recent immigrants from societies where English has no official status (e.g., Mexico or China), especially adults from rural areas who may not have studied English in school. Their English speaking and writing skills, therefore, are often equally undeveloped (see Myth #2 below). The last identifiable group is Generation 1.5 students. They were born in the United States or emigrated as young children. They initially speak their parents' languages (L1s) at home, but they are usually educated in monolingual schools and are denied the opportunity to become literate in those tongues. As a result, the majority quickly become English-dominant and suffer attrition in their L1(s) (Roberge, 2009).

Even these specific labels, however, are insufficient to describe the broad spectrum of multilingual students. Matsuda and Matsuda (2009), themselves multilingual writers, urge us to view categories as open and overlapping: "In order to understand fully the student population under consideration, the characteristics of the students need to be described explicitly and multidimensionally each and every time" (p. 61). I recommend that tutors hear the individual voices of multilinguals by reading memoirs such as Asgedom's *Of Beetles and Angels* (2002), Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* (2004), and Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (2005). Films that offer compelling stories include *Lost Boys of Sudan* (Mylan & Shenk, 2004), *Papers* (Shine & Galisky, 2010), and *Admissions* (Somalarski & Darbes, 2012).

Myth #2: Multilingual Students are Multiliterate

In monolingual literate societies, where second languages (L2s) are primarily taught in school, the expected outcome is that students will learn to read and write. In fact, strong research evidence supports the transfer of literacy skills from one's L1(s) to additional languages (Cummins, 2000; Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2009). Many multilinguals have learned to read and write in their L1(s). However, this is not the case for some, such as many Generation 1.5 learners in the United States who speak their L1(s) but cannot read or write them. Imagine the enormous task, then, of learning an L2 and, at the same time, learning to read and write in *any* language for the first time.

According to Holten (2009), this reality must impact the approaches to "correctness" that teachers and tutors employ in assessing the writing of emerging literates. Much like L1 speakers who become literate, these writers rely on linguistic intuitions gained from speaking rather than from formal instruction. Unlike L1 and other L2 writers, however, their grammar and vocabulary errors are less systematic and are, therefore, more difficult to treat. Here is an excerpt from a student's submission to an online writing center:

Christ Redeemer. Located in Brazil, This is a 125-foot that weights about 700 tons statue of Jesus stands at the top of the Corcovado Mountain Overlooking Rio De Janerio. The idea of the statue began in the 1850's from Pedro Maria Boss,

Father boss and other Catholics wanted a monument placed on the mountain that would look over the city, Rio de Janeiro. Brazilian engineer Heitor da Silva Costa designed the statue and Paul Landowski crafted the statue. The statue started being built in 1926 and it was completed in 1931.

This excerpt demonstrates the student's struggles with grammar, punctuation, and word choice. Because she has no history of literacy in her L1, she is reckoning with literacy practices for the first time.

To build knowledge of and encourage empathy for emerging multilingual literates, I recommend that tutors read about immigrant youth in U.S. public schools. Among the best books are *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child* (Igoa, 1995), *Tongue-Tied* (Santa Ana, 2004), and *Made in America* (Olsen, 2008). These tales of "submersion education" (Baker & Jones, 1998) open tutors' eyes to the lived experience of multilingual students in a country where bilingual/biliterate education receives little funding and specifically in states where it has been outlawed (Arizona, California, Massachusetts).

Myth #3: Most Multilingual Writing Problems Are Caused by Writers' L1(s)

The assumption, here, is that language learning relies on transfer (translation) from the L1(s) to the L2. This is partly correct. Transfer may occur when the L1 and L2 share similar categories. For example, both Spanish and English grammars contain the category

“adjective.” This can lead to transfer as demonstrated in the following sentence submitted to an online writing center: “Sachs and Warner (1995) state that *resources abundance* leads to weak institutions and in turn lowering economic growth.” The Spanish L1 writer of this sentence has learned that adjectives precede rather than follow English nouns. Yet he has transferred the Spanish rule that adjectives can be plural (*resources abundance*) His *interlanguage* system, therefore, continues to include rules transferred from Spanish. But transfer does not explain every learner error. As language learning progresses, errors are less influenced by L1(s) and become similar to all learners, in part because all must acquire specific features of English. Developmental interlanguages are systematic and rule governed (Cook, 2008); further language learning restructures interlanguages to incrementally approximate the target language, in this case, English.

In terms of interlanguage errors, Nakamaru (2010) found that the more advanced the writer, the more likely the difficulties are with vocabulary rather than grammar. The following quoted sentence, from a submission to an online writing center, was written by a student enrolled in a prematriculation intensive English program; her interlanguage is systematic in misusing articles and omitting noun plurals: “Success in American college does not only mean studying hard, achieving *high GPA*, and getting *degree*, but also mean integrating to American culture.” The next sentence was written by the same writer a year later, in an

undergraduate course paper: “General education is important and beneficial. Unfortunately, many students cannot realize the benefits because they only think they are forced to take these courses, which makes them *agonized*.” The writer is now correctly using articles and noun plurals; her error (*agonized*) is one of vocabulary choice.

I recommend that tutors read Selinker’s (1972) classic article on interlanguage, as well as Han’s (2004) treatment of interlanguage development interrupted. The definitive work on language transfer is Odlin (1989), which discusses L1–L2 transfer not only of syntax and vocabulary but also of discourse and semantic categories.

Myth #4: Multilingual Writers Make the Same Errors in Grammar and Vocabulary

This is the converse of Myth #3 and is based on one or more of these assumptions: All languages are essentially the same (because there are language universals); all learner L1s are similar in that they differ from English; and all learners, regardless of L1, go through similar language-learning stages. However, although commonalities among languages, L1 background, and developmental stage all affect language acquisition, each learner’s path differs.

In terms of L1 differences, Collins (2002) compared her

Japanese and French L1 students' learning of English simple past-tense verbs. She predicted, and found, that Japanese speakers made fewer errors in simple past tense than French speakers. This is because French has a second past-tense form similar to the English present perfect (*has caught*), which learners often substitute for simple past tense (*caught*). Japanese, in comparison, has only one past-tense form, so, unlike the French L1 students, the Japanese L1 students had no competing form to transfer. Collins' study complicates simplistic assumptions about L1 background and "problems" learners face when writing in English.

The best way to enter the lived reality of multilingual writers and to understand the individuality of the language learning process is to become an active language learner. I once engaged a class of U.S. ESL teacher trainees in a "language shock" simulation by conducting the first six class sessions of the semester entirely in Portuguese (Thonus, 2001). Their daily journal entries, written in English, were filled with acknowledgment of the enormity of the language-learning task, empathy for L2 learners, and excitement about what they were acquiring. Each student, when comparing her learning with a classmate's, understood that even though their L1 was the same (English), all made very different errors in grammar and vocabulary.

Tutors interested in delving into L2 acquisition in greater detail can consult Ellis and Widdowson's *Second Language Acquisition* (1997) and *How Languages are Learned* (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

These texts show how individual learner aptitude, motivation, and other cognitive and social factors (Myles, 2002) can also influence language learning. Implicit in this critique of myths about language and language learners is my observation that few educators are fully aware of the sheer number of multilingual students around them. Even if these learners are in the minority now, the current demographic trends indicate multilinguals will be the majority in the near future, regardless of official language policies (Shin & Ortman, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2011).

Shattering myths about international and immigrant multilingual students requires understanding the complexity of language learning and literacy development. The next step is to confront myths about tutoring multilingual writers. Doing so demands a reconsideration of theory and practice.

Myths about Tutoring Multilingual Writers

Like language myths, tutoring myths reside in unexamined educational ideologies informed by English-only policies and practices. These ideologies covertly discount writers' and educators' experiences as multilinguals (Enright & Gilliland, 2011). One of these myths is that teaching or tutoring in a learner's first or dominant language will encourage "translation" instead of second-language development. Another is that language learners must have native speakers as tutors because they provide the best models for imitation. What Grimm (1999) calls our "good intentions" must be

challenged in order to better support monolingual *and* multilingual writers.

Myth #1: Multilingual Writers Should Be Tutored in the Same Way as Monolingual Writers

Although tutoring theory and research advocate differential practices for tutees, tutoring “lore” holds that a common set of practices work for all (Babcock & Thonus, 2012). We assume that “all tutoring is good tutoring”—better than nothing—and that “one size fits all.” These are, quite frankly, cop-outs. The point of tutoring is to individualize instruction. Tutors must learn what multilingual writers need and tailor their practices to those learners’ needs.

To illustrate, tutoring lore prescribes that tutors be indirect, non-intrusive, and “minimalist” in their practice (Brooks, 1995). Early in my research on L2 tutorials (Thonus, 1999), I discovered that tutors’ attempts to be polite and indirect with multilingual writers resulted in making themselves completely incomprehensible. Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) recommended that tutors avoid Socratic questioning (“What do you think would work better here?”) as well as reading line-by-line to correct each and every error. In contrast, I found that tutors’ direct questions and answers corresponded with multilingual writers’ satisfaction with tutoring sessions (Thonus, 2004). In a study of multilingual writers’ revisions after tutoring, Williams (2004) found that tutors’ explicit scaffolding resulted in improved L2 texts.

The following example from a face-to-face writing consultation depicts a tutor avoiding lore and engaging with a multilingual writer in a comprehensible, direct manner. Notice, too, the tutor's scaffolding of revision for the author's conclusion and her suggestion that he add pertinent information to his introduction:

T: That might be a good way to end, maybe a conclusion that talks about how this impacted your life.

W: Of course I earned the money so that I could buy a car (laugh).

T: See, I don't know any of this from what you have so far. This would be very interesting. You earned money to buy a car... Maybe we can make a list of other ways that it impacted your life. It helped you earn money to buy a car. Did anything else?

W: It was good experience because I met so many different kind of people. Like for example people who living near the store, in generally they poor. I'm talking about the people who waiting me ten o'clock in front of liquor store.

T: So that would be really nice if you could describe those people earlier in your paper, so when you conclude and you talk about why that's a good experience to have met these interesting people, the reader will already know who they were.

W: Uh-huh.

To gain insight into multilingual writers' needs, I recommend that tutors study Harris and Silva's "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and

Options” (1993). More recent book-length treatments of tutoring multi-lingual writers are Reynolds’ *One on One with Second Language Writers* (2009) and Bruce and Rafoth’s edited collection *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (2009). Myth #2: All Multilingual Writers Should Be Tutored in the Same Way

Once tutors accept that tutoring monolingual and multilingual writers *should* be different, because multilingual writers are not a uniform group, because some are literate only in English, and because some, but not all, writing errors stem from writers’ L1(s), tutoring should be customized to the individual multilingual writer. Tutoring practices must differ from writer to writer.

For instance, international students often write academic English more fluently and accurately than they speak it, whereas long-term U.S. residents are often more fluent in spoken—but not necessarily academic—English. Goen-Salter, Porter, and vanDommelen (2009) offer this example from the writing of a college student whom they label “Generation 1.5”: “Even if some of my friends are Chinese and can speak the same language as I can, I have never *spoke* Chinese with any of my friends” (p. 240). An international student with little exposure to spoken American English would most likely recognize this as an error and correct it, changing *spoke* to *spoken*. But because substitution of past (*spoke*) for past participle (*spoken*) is increasingly common in informal American speech (Sampson, 2002), a long-term resident writer may not recognize *spoke* as an error in writing. Unlike an international

student, this tutee needs the tutor to first identify *spoke* as an error, explain that speaking and academic writing differ, introduce the form *spoken*, and explain why it is correct.

The more tutors learn about individual multilingual students, the better they will understand their strengths and needs as writers. When working with international students, Reynolds (2009) endorses tutor questions such as “How much reading have you done in English?” and “Did you have a chance to speak English outside of the classroom?” (p. 21). When working with immigrant/long-term residents, Goen-Salter et al. (2009) suggest “Do you read and write another language?” and “What’s your strongest language for reading and writing?” (pp. 238–239).

Myth #3: Tutoring Is Best Done in English by Native-Speaking Tutors

This is, without a doubt, the most pernicious tutoring myth. Because we believe that monolinguals “know” English, we assume that multilingual writers learn best from tutors who do not speak their L1s. Because we want to offer students the “best models” of English, we reproduce a “fractional” model of monolingualism (Cruz-Ferreira, 2010) by insisting that multilingual writers be tutored by native speakers only. I call this belief “ignorance as expertise.” The research suggests otherwise: In reality, multilingual tutoring by multilingual tutors may be superior to any other model.

Taylor’s study of multilingual-writers-as-tutors (2007) revealed that their grammar explanations were “considerably more

accurate” than those of monolingual tutors (p. 51). International, immigrant, and English L1 multilingual tutors in Wang’s study (2013) insisted that they tutored only in English because “using English is the policy and using English to tutor English writing is professional” (p. 224). However, when questioned more closely, the same tutors admitted to using writers’ L1(s) as a “rapport-building tool” and to explaining “subject-matter, abstract concepts, or jargons” (p. 223). Comparing outcomes from writing tutorials conducted in English vs. writers’ L1s, Cumming and So (1996) found no significant differences in the quality of English texts produced. In multilingual tutoring and writing centers, most of which are outside North America, tutors and students can choose the language(s) of their sessions. For example, the Independent Learning Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong offers tutoring in either Chinese or English on Chinese- or English-language texts.

Although I know of no books about multilingual tutors (and clearly, we need them!), I recommend some written for a broader audience. A classic treatment of what it means (and does not mean) to be a native speaker of a language is Davies’ *The Native Speaker* (2003). Braine’s *Non-native Educators and English Language Teaching* (1999) discusses the advantages multilingual teachers bring to the classroom. And Yoo’s recent article “Nonnative Teachers in the Expanding Circle and the Ownership of English” (2014) argues that even in English as a foreign language context, teachers who share their students’ L1(s) offer superior instruction. Many of these

insights can translate from teaching to tutoring.

Myth #4: Multilingual Writers Are Concerned Only With “Editing,” and Tutors Should Be Able to Answer Their Questions About Grammar and Vocabulary

One assumption underlying this myth is that L2 writers equate “good writing” with “accurate writing,” and that they have little concern for organization and logical development. Multilingual writers *are* focused on linguistic accuracy (Hartshorn & Evans, 2012), and to deny them feedback on vocabulary and grammar is unethical (Babcock & Thonus, 2012). Once asked about their goals for a session, however, many multilingual writers *do* want feedback on larger issues, as this excerpt from a face-to-face writing center consultation demonstrates:

W: You know I’m a foreign writer, and so I’m afraid
sometimes I use odd words, different.

T: Okay.

W: Others um than I’m supposed to. I want to make myself
clear, but uh sometimes I know I sound very bizarre.

T: Sure. So you’re wanting to look for like, sentence fluency,
that sort of thing?

W: Yes. Sentence, and uh, and *if you could also provide some
opinion about the organization of this paper. That would be very
good.*

T: Sure, yeah, definitely.

As a consequence of believing Myth #3 above, we assert that monolingual tutors know English and therefore can teach it. Reading “English for Those Who (Think They) Already Know It” in Bruce and Rafoth’s volume (2009) is enough to disabuse anyone of this notion.

The reality is that monolinguals’ knowledge of their native language is mostly tacit or implicit (Zappavigna, 2013). This means they must learn to teach explicitly what they already produce intuitively—a process that takes years. Therefore, expecting monolingual tutors to answer all the grammar and vocabulary questions multilingual writers ask them is unfeasible.

What all tutors *can* do is to point out grammar and vocabulary errors and to guide multilingual writers to helpful resources for self-correction. Ferris’ *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* (2002) is a useful handbook for identifying patterns of error and for developing a grammatical and lexical metalanguage to do so.

Conclusion

A serious examination of myths about multilinguals and how to tutor them must lead to a better understanding of their lived reality and to a critical reexamination of our tutoring practices. Now that the support of multilingual students is everyone’s responsibility, we can make one of two choices: (1) educate tutors in a one-size-fits-all approach or (2) educate tutors in methods specific to monolingual *and* to multilingual writers. Having

attempted both approaches at different times in my career, I recommend the second as the better option. Developing tutors' expertise is a time-consuming process, but shattering myths about multilinguals and how to tutor them is the first and most important step in that process.

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