The Ambiguous Nature of Bilingualism and Its Ramifications for Writing Instruction

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This hypothetical case of a freshman wrestling with her identity as an English user demonstrates that the old categories of native and non-native speaker do not adequately describe today's college population. The lack of informed strategies in college writing courses to deal with students possessing different degrees of proficiency in English leads to both personal and educational consequences. Recommendations for college instructors are discussed.

The educational and linguistic literature in the last 10 years has documented the changing linguistic nature of the typical first-year college student. More and more incoming students bring with them home dialects of English that are influenced by other languages (Harklau, 2003). This is especially true in certain parts of the country where population shifts have added to the linguistic diversity of the surrounding communities. High-school students from these cities and towns are sometimes the first in their families to attend college, and they register at local community colleges, in city and state university systems, and at small liberal arts colleges such as ours. The result is that what teachers might once have taken for granted—being able to ascertain whether a student is a native English speaker or not—is no longer an easy task, and the disconnect between perception and reality has an impact on writing instruction in colleges (Trimbur, 2008).

As instructors of developmental and first year-college composition, we have encountered many such students. We believe that the current college placement and evaluation systems

are not set up to handle situations in which students use various home "Englishes." To investigate this phenomenon, we introduce a composite student, Maria, who represents various facets of the dilemma we as educators face. We first encounter our student Maria in college in the United States after she moved here from the Dominican Republic as a 9-year-old with a good deal of fluent, informal English but little skill in reading and writing formal, standard English.

Maria and her teachers in her first year of college wrestle with the issue of native fluency. Their struggles involve such questions as, "What does it mean to be a native speaker of a language?" and "What are the educational ramifications of being a first versus second language user?"

To address these questions, the following issues will be discussed:

1. Factors that make defining "bilingualism" and "native fluency" difficult.
2. Academic and emotional consequences for students whose teachers have vague and conflicting definitions of bilingualism.
3. Recommendations to help students whose weak academic language skills appear to be barriers to their academic success.
4. Potential impact on the social and emotional well-being of the student.

Entering College: The Placement Exam

Maria's college asks all incoming first-year students to take a writing placement exam to determine the writing class for which they should register. Students are given 60 minutes to read a text and write a two-page essay about this text. Exam results place students into an English-as a-second language (ESL) writing course, a developmental writing course, or a first-year composition course. Consider the following writing sample from Maria's placement exam, presented in Table 1. Her reading selection dealt with the sexual nature of male locker-room talk. After reading the excerpt, contemplate how you would place Maria and whether she is an ESL student or a native speaker with developmental issues.

Table 1

Maria's Placement Essay

If Tommy would have interrupt or any men in the locker room the spokesman would probably have felt disrespected which could lead to a conflict between spokesman and interrupter. Also the spokesman might not feel disrespect and change the conversation which it would be a more comfortable place for the other men in the locker room who feel comfortable in their conversation. An other situation could have been someone could tell the spokesman that they don't feel like hearing about his love life. Maybe the spokesman as respect would change the conversation and tell his story to his friend on his own time.

Continuing in College: Developmental Writing Course (WS 01)

Not surprisingly, Maria's score on the placement test was too low to allow her to enter the composition course. Yet she was not identified as needing ESL. Maria was enrolled in Writing Skills 01 (WS 01), a non-credit bearing course in basic academic writing. This course was designed to ease the transition to academic English, and while it was not an ESL course, it was open to native and non-native speakers depending on their scores on the placement exam. The course syllabus listed the following student objectives:

At the end of this course, each student can expect a working knowledge of various writing and reading skills, including:

1. A working knowledge of grammatical structures.
2. Understanding the inter-related processes of speaking, listening, reading and writing.
3. The ability to pre-write, plan and formulate critical questions, interpret and discern facts for reading and writing purposes.
4. The ability to proofread, edit and revise.

The professor, who encouraged the students to call him Max, was a young man still in graduate school working as an adjunct at Maria's college. He seemed very relaxed and accepting of all the students. On her first paper, Maria received a B+ and a "Good!" This was a first for Maria as a writer.

Maria grew more confident and began participating in class.

She also started to enjoy the class and the weekly assignments, consisting of 1-2 page papers on such topics as "My Favorite Hobby" and "My Dream Job." Instead of those old, familiar comments like "AWK" in the margins of her high-school essays, her college papers came back with suggested revisions. Max took a great deal of time on each student's paper, suggesting re-writes for unclear sentences and re-organization strategies for disorganized paragraphs. He believed in validating the writers' ideas and de-emphasizing errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Max felt that his students were in WS 01 to uncover and organize their thoughts and that Spell Check and tutors would take care of the rest.

Later in the semester, Max introduced texts for students to respond to, but usually the response was a personal reflection, opinion, or connection to the text. Maria's writing level was still poor, even after revisions and sessions with Max, as seen in the excerpts from Table 2 below.

Table 2
Excerpts from Maria's WS 01 Papers

Paragraph from a revised paper I

Birth order in family does not always influence you personality. Alder who believed in the psychological of birth order was right, but also depends on your culture. I believe your up bringing can influence your personality and that siblings can alter your personality. I come from a family of three, I have a sister who is the oldest, a brother who is the middle child, and I am the youngest. Although my sister is the oldest she never display leadership qualities. She never had the responsibility of watch over us when we were children. While my parent were working my grandmother was always there for us. My sister never had responsibilities such as baby sit or do chores, nor did she want any responsibilities. My brother took on more of a leadership role, and I believe he felt obligation because he was male.

Paragraph from a revised paper II

Many two years colleges accept student without their high school diploma. Most of those students receive help from the government. Gov. George E. Pataki disagree, he believes that students who don't have their diploma shouldn't receive help from the government until they complete 24 credits. The government discovered that some colleges gave students financial aid to those who don't qualify so that they would collect their money. Then students would drop out and cancel their students' loans. So this won't occur, now students need to take a test in order to get government help by the Department of Education.

Max saw progress. His course empowered Maria as a thinker. She didn't seem to hesitate as much when putting a sentence down on paper. Less worried about grammatical or mechanical errors, she let her ideas flow. Although her revisions focused on grammar and writing mechanics, she also was dealing with complex issues in her writing. She developed more confidence in using her voice. At the end of the term, Maria received a B+ in the course. Max rewarded Maria's efforts over the 14 weeks with a high grade to encourage her to continue to practice her writing.

The writing samples in Table 2, however, show Maria to be ill-prepared for more academically-rigorous courses. Professors she would face in future semesters would assume that her writing skills were adequate and that WS 01 had "fixed" any problems she might have had. However, these samples show that Maria had failed to identify and correct a variety of grammatical and mechanical errors, and she continued to write about subjects that are somewhat concrete compared to more abstract material she would face in other courses.

College: Credit-Bearing First-Year Seminar

Earning a B+ in WS 101 allowed Maria to enroll in First-Year Seminar (FYS) in the spring term. On the first day, her professor, Dr. Clarkson, handed out a 12-page syllabus for the course which required students to write three 10-page essays and read five books during the term.

The learning goals and objectives of FYS were listed on the

syllabus as follows:

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Participate more fully in the rigors of collegiate academics.
2. Appreciate the value of in-depth exploration from several disciplinary perspectives.
3. Read college-level texts with increasing confidence.
4. Engage in intensive critical thinking and writing.
5. Understand the composition process.
6. Compose effective academic essays.

Maria left that first class meeting shaking. This was not the atmosphere she had come to associate with writing in Max's class. The next meeting, Maria sat as far back in the room as she could and remained quiet. Everyone in the class seemed to speak an educated, academic style of English. Professor Clarkson kept emphasizing the rigors of the college-level material they would cover, how this class was not going to be a repeat of high school. She assigned a 4-page summary and critique of an article by a sociolinguist on the conversational patterns used by native and non-native English speakers in advisement sessions with their college professors.

"Is Dr. Clarkson trying to tell me something?" Maria thought. "Is she saying that I am still a foreigner in this country, that I am not a native speaker of English?" Despite these doubts, Maria worked hard to read the assigned article and write a paper, an excerpt from which is given in Table 3.

Table 3 Excerpt from Maria's Summary

> In "Cross-Cultural Interviews" an article written by Susan Landau identifies verbal and nonverbal strategies of rapport. In the article Landau examine nonverbal and verbal strategies between two foreign advisor and their students their students were non native and native students. She used non native and native students for her research to discovered what strategies can be use in order to built a rapport conversation. According to Landau, "rapport is a harmonious relationship" (3). Landau studied the conversation of the advisors and their students. Landau noticed that different rapport strategies were used by the native speakers than the non-native speakers.

The Landau essay assignment included an intellectual component that did not allow Maria to reflect personally on the issue, and her confidence waned as a result. The paper was returned with a big "See Me" across the top. In a private conference, Dr. Clarkson told Maria that she shouldn't be in FYS and that she should have registered for WS 01. She also asked if Maria had signed up for ESL tutoring. Maria burst into tears.

After the conference, Dr. Clarkson checked Maria's transcript and was very concerned that this student, so weak in writing and reading skills, not to mention critical thinking, received a B+ in WS 01.

What went wrong here? Why did Maria, Max, and Dr. Clarkson have such different expectations?

Ambiguous Nature of Native Fluency and Bilingualism

As this scenario illustrates, Maria, Max, and Dr. Clarkson held different expectations about the nature of fluency. This is not surprising as the term "bilingual" has multiple definitions, and one universally agreed upon set of criteria does not exist. For example, must a truly bilingual person be able to read and write in two languages, or is spoken fluency sufficient? What if the person can write in the second language, but only informally, not well enough to fulfill academic assignments?

Disputes over definitions of the term "native speaker" have yet to be resolved. Trimbur outlined the pivotal debate during the 1966 Dartmouth conference which focused on who should teach English. The conference produced a discouragingly large and disparate group of definitions:

- A native speaker is someone whose utterances are samples of L [target language].
- A native speaker is someone who has no language acquired prior to L. Here nativeness is explained in terms of priority in the learning process.
- A native speaker is someone who can understand all varieties of L. The limits and extent of his comprehensibility define L.
- A native speaker is someone who is by nature curious about L (Trimbur, 2008, p. 58-59).

As more educators consider writing across the curriculum

and incorporate writing pedagogy into their classrooms, they might well encounter issues raised in Maria's case. One potential issue is the lack of widely accepted definitions for native fluency and bilingualism. Even among linguists, there are conflicting definitions. For example, while Bloomfield restricted the term "bilingualism" to those possessing near native fluency in two languages, others, like McNamara, required only minimal competency in a second language (Kayser, 1995). Differences in these definitions raise other questions: Must a truly bilingual person be fluent in all the modalities of language--speech, oral comprehension, reading, and writing? And what degree of fluency is adequate? Further, while the person might be fluent in an informal style of the language,he or she might not have the competence to use the second language successfully in an educational setting. Some cases of bilingualism are ambiguous because the form of the second language the person possesses is not considered the standard dialect. So a person might "know" English, but it could be Ebonics. Or a person might "know" French and Haitian Creole French, but consider those two language forms the same thing, the latter an informal style of the former. (For a discussion of this issue, see Romaine 1995.)

Generation 1.5 Versus the ESL Learner

The status of bilingualism has become even murkier with the evolution of immigration patterns in urban America. Over the last twenty years, the label "generation 1.5" has increasingly been applied to students whose English language performance exhibits both native and non-native traits. Harklau (2003) characterizes this diverse group, by saying:

> Some of these students immigrated to the United States while they were in elementary school; others arrived during high school. Still others were born in this country but grew up speaking a language other than English at home. They may see themselves as bilingual, but English may be the only language in which they have academic preparation or in which they can read and write. At the same time, these students may not feel that they have a full command of English, having grown up speaking another language at home or in their community. Equipped with social skills in English, generation 1.5 students often appear in conversation to be native English speakers. However, they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing.

As we saw, Maria did not consider herself a foreigner. She was bilingual and had been speaking English for most of her life. She was incredibly frustrated. Maria was also insulted by Dr. Clarkson's assumption that she needed ESL classes. Holten's work confirms that Maria's emotional reaction to being labeled an ESL learner is not unusual. Holton found that the resentment generation 1.5 students feel at being placed in ESL undermines their ability to make progress (2009, p. 171). In addition, generation 1.5 students have little in common with ESL learners. Most ESL students have studied English grammar for years and know complex terminology, such as present perfect, modal verb, and relative pronoun. Generation 1.5 students have learned English through immersion and possess little overt grammatical terminology, mirroring their native-speaking peers.

Another glaring difference is academic preparedness. Many international students are better prepared for college because they have already mastered literary skills in their native language and are able to apply critical thinking and argument development learned in their native language environment to assignments given in English. The same cannot be said for students from underfunded public schools in the United States. Therefore, as Holten concludes: "It is difficult to address these differing student needs, backgrounds, abilities, and expectations in one course" (2009, p.172). Unfortunately, small colleges rarely have the student numbers needed to provide separate developmental courses for native speakers, generation 1.5 students, and international students.

What Should Teachers Do?

A review of some of the issues covered by this hypothetical case in light of the linguistic and pedagogical research that has been discussed results in some recommendations:

The Concept of Native Fluency: Dr. Clarkson fell into the trap of assuming speakers of accented English with poor writing skills are non-native to the language, even though, as mentioned previously, linguists would disagree among themselves on whether

Maria was bilingual. Teachers should increase their awareness of, and sensitivity to, language differences. Teachers should talk with students, share perceptions, and compare them. Labels are crucial to self-identity. Maria clearly saw herself as bilingual. In the twenty-first century, Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States, and more students like Maria will be be coming to college in the future.

Goen-Salter, et al. (2009) list activities teachers and their students can do to uncover language backgrounds, perceptions, and emotions about linguistic history/language identity. Their book offers such survey questions as, "Which language do you feel is your best language and why?" and "Which language are you most comfortable writing in and why?" (238-240). Dr. Clarkson could have worked through such exercises with Maria to arrive at a more realistic view of Maria's abilities. At the same time, Maria could choose her own label, for while academic success is within Dr. Clarkson's expertise, self-identifying is personal and within Maria' purview.

Emotional Consequences: As teachers, we must address students' own beliefs about themselves as language users and not make assumptions about students' English skills across genre and modality. Hasson (2008) writes, "Student perceptions of their (language) skills… do not always match the student's true abilities in the language, particularly in the written mode" (139). Students who see themselves as bilingual might or might not be biliterate.

Academic Strategies: Typical in academia are the assumptions students are either monolingual speakers of English or speakers of English as a second language. Consequently, students are assessed with an exam that puts them in a sequence of writing courses for "native" speakers or a sequence for second language speakers. In the twenty-first century, educators must challenge these assumptions. The dichotomy of native and non-native English users has broken down; better assessment tools and processes are needed for colleges to place students in appropriate writing courses.

For Maria, once in a class, her failures in writing critical response essays on sophisticated material did not need to be framed as failures in English. Maria's professors could have discussed her need to improve critical analysis of texts and the acquisition of the academic register. In general, developmental writing courses need

to build on the personal essay and develop the academic skills needed in college, such as critical thinking, logical argumentation, addressing complex and abstract topics.

Summary

This hypothetical case offers a profile of a young woman wrestling with her identity as an English user. The ambiguity of the term "bilingual" and the lack of informed strategies in college writing courses to deal with students possessing different degrees of proficiency in English led to consequences at both the personal level and the educational level for Maria.

In the set of encounters described, the problems of a writing pedagogy that does not look at the larger picture of bilingualism and biliteracy are illustrated. The disparity between students' command of academic English and college professors' expectations can only be resolved through clearer understanding of linguistic competencies. It is essential to realize that language skills are not an "all or nothing" acquisition. Instead, language facility is something individuals work on throughout their lives. Furthermore, the old categories of native and non-native speaker do not adequately describe today's college population. A continuing lack of awareness of the nature of bilingualism results in stakeholders blaming one another for challenges and failures, in programs that are not prepared to address student needs, and with ill-prepared students caught in the middle.

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