Embracing Global Varieties of English in a Writing Safe Space—Exploring the Use of Comic Books in a College Writing Class with Second Language Learners

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Introduction

Over the years that I've been teaching second language writers and preaching the importance of "standard" language use in academic English writing, I somehow secretly feel guilty when I grade papers that fall out of "standard" academic English writing, papers that nevertheless exhibit clear features of good writing in other languages/cultures. Such guilt comes partly from my sympathy for those who use English as a second language as I do, but mostly comes from my doubt as to what a claim of "standard English" implies in a world that is becoming increasingly built upon frequent contact of varieties of English around the globe. For example, when a Chinese student writes a long introduction that seems far-fetched from the topic of her essay and we tell her that she needs to "get to the point," what does that imply to the student? Does it mean that being straightforward is always the golden rule in any type of writing in any culture?

In a world that is fraught with a troubling political climate, I believe it is especially important that we provide guidance in our teaching to students not only for their academic endeavors but also for their understanding of the complexities in language and the social implications of language varieties. With such belief in mind, I ask: How can we create safe spaces in our ESL writing classrooms to make students feel not only comfortable but also proud to use the Englishes that they use in their everyday interactions outside of school? In this paper, I

examine the Comic Book Project that I designed for a first-year theme-based writing course that I taught at Case Western Reserve University and explore the potential of the project in creating a safe space for students to use global varieties of English in ESL writing classes.

Background

Since Phillipson's publication of *Linguistic Imperialism* in 1992, a plethora of research has been done on interrogating the hegemony of the English language and its effect on local and indigenous languages and cultures (Canagarajah 57; Pennycook 5). To combat the hegemony of the English language in the global linguistic domain, many scholars have been promoting concepts that embrace local varieties of English, such as World Englishes (Matsuda and Matsuda 369) and Global Englishes (Galloway and Rose 11). In his book "English as a Global Language," Crystal discusses the linguistic distinctiveness of the Englishes used around the world from aspects of grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, discourses, and phonology (147-172). He predicts that varieties of English in the local contexts (i.e. "he be running;" "furnitures") may eventually appear in writing as English continues to be influenced by users around the globe (173).

With recent development in educational studies suggesting the benefits of embracing students' home languages and cultures in our classrooms (Darder 103), code-meshing (the blending of dialects and languages with standard English) and code-switching (the act of shifting between dialects or languages in different settings) have been advocated in teaching ESL classes as ways to embrace students' local varieties of English (Young and Martinez xxiv) and many

college instructors have begun to allow code-meshing and code-switching in the informal speaking activities in their ESL classrooms.

Despite this progress, college writing classes in the US still remain linguistically homogenous spaces where standard American English is celebrated as the norm while global and local varieties of English are treated as errors to be eliminated (Lee 312). It seems that though code-meshing and code-switching can now find their places in oral communications in classrooms, it is difficult to find room for local/global varieties of English in academic writing. Thus, students who use global varieties of English are oftentimes marginalized in our academic writing practices which set the American and British English as the norms.

Numerous studies have shown that instead of being erroneous, different varieties of English, such as African American English, follow their respective grammatical rules and function effectively in different contexts, thus they exist in their very own right. As Cunningham insightfully points out in her discussion of the status of African American English in the American society, only when we see African American English as a language of its own right instead of a subordinate and deficit variation of standard American English, can we recognize "the validity of the language and its users" (91). Such a claim applies to other varieties of English and users of those varieties of English as well. When we, as composition teachers to ESL students, diligently correct the "mistakes" in our students' writings, we unfortunately and oftentimes unconsciously send a signal that not only the students are incompetent language users but also bad writers. As a natural consequence of being constantly corrected in their writings, the students feel ashamed of the local/global varieties of English that they bring to the classroom

from their communities. Such shame, could even worse, lead to doubt and resentment towards one's own culture and identity. Additionally, since language is constantly changing and is forever influenced by its users, what we see as mistakes today may become norms in the future as illustrated by Crystal's discussion of today's evolvement of English varieties (173). So, instead of correcting the deviations from standard American or British English presented in students' writings, it is more meaningful to discuss effective language use across different contexts with our students when we read their writings.

The Comic Book Project

Enlightened by recent developments in language theories and educational studies mentioned above, I have been in hopes of finding ways to provide students a safe space in my writing classes to use varieties of English that come from their local communities. The three classes that I taught in the Spring 2017 semester had 10 to 13 students in each class. All the students were international students, most of whom came from China. I had one student from Malaysia, one from South Korea, and one from Vietnam. Based on the diagnostic essays that they wrote when they entered the university, these students were enrolled in a two-semester language strengthening course where, in the first semester, all aspects of the English language skills—including reading, writing, listening, and speaking—are emphasized, while in the second semester, the emphasis is put more on academic writing. The two-semester course allows both the students to take more time to develop their English language skills and the instructors to build more assignments and activities to ease the students into the realm of academic English

writing which oftentimes sounds formidable to second language writers. While all instructors use the same textbook in the first semester, the instructors can choose individual textbooks and topics to create a theme-based writing course of their own in the second semester. There were three major writing assignments in the first semester, including writing a summary, a summary and response paper, and an argumentative essay. Though the instructors used the same textbook, they did have the freedom to choose what essays and topics to use for the writing assignments. Such freedom gave the instructors the opportunity to build the topics/themes that they wanted to use in the second semester into the writing assignments for the first semester.

The theme for my Spring 2017 course was educational equity. To prepare my students for in-depth discussions of the theme, I asked students to read, discuss, and write about articles related to educational issues, such as parenting, in the Fall 2016 semester. In the second semester, I gave students three major writing assignments, including a Comic Book Project, an annotated bibliography, and a research paper. For the final research paper, students had to choose a topic related to education and write an eight-to-ten-page paper based on their primary research involving doing surveys and/or interviews. I intentionally kept the topic broad because I consider finding an appropriate research topic to be an important skill for college students to obtain. Though students were not required to use the same topic for all three assignments, I encouraged them to do so. It takes a lot of time and energy in reviewing the literature in order to write a research paper with nuanced analysis. It's almost impossible to research three completely different topics in one semester. So, most students ended up using the same topic or at least similar topics in all three assignments.

As the first major writing assignment for the semester, the Comic Book Project served as an opportunity for students to explore topics that they wanted to research more deeply for their final papers. In completing the assignment, students were asked to raise awareness among their college peers of an educational issue relevant to their lives and call upon their peers to take actions to tackle the issue. In order to achieve these goals with an eight-page comic, students needed to decide on a specific topic and tell a story that is both believable and appealing to the audience. Students used the software ComicLife 3 for the assignment and they had one month to complete the project. They could either download the trial version of the software for free on their own computers and use it for one month or they could use the software on computers in the university library. Before students started working on the project, I invited a media specialist from the university to give a workshop on using the software, features of good comic books, and using online images properly.

As a generation that grew up with technology and social media, students were very excited about the project. Many students showed sincere enthusiasm towards writing a comic book of their own, especially those students who read comic books before and loved them. On the other hand, a lot of students, even including those who read comic books, expressed different levels of anxiety because it's simply not something that they ever did or were expected to do for a writing class. To ease students' anxiety and better guide them in completing the project, I held 20-minute individual conferences with the students after students finished their first drafts. It was during those conferences that I uncovered the potential that the Comic Book Project held for creating a space for global varieties of English in ESL writing classes.

When the students came to our individual conferences with their first drafts, I found that one of the biggest problems with most of their comics was that they read like PowerPoint slides for lectures! Used to writing "standard" English argumentative essays through practicing for TOEFL and college application essays, these students found it difficult to break from listing reasoning points and using long sentences with complex structures. The "stories" that they told did focus on important educational issues, but they were lifeless. For example, a student told the story of William Moulton Marston, creator of the comic book *Wonder Woman*. The student wanted to argue that interest is the best teacher of all and that it's important for schools to allow students to pursue their true dreams instead of only pushing students to get good grades. The student used the first seven pages chronicling Marston's life with random pictures of Marston from the internet and one-sentence descriptions of what he did in that stage of his life. Then, the student used bullet points to put forward what he wanted to tell (or more accurately, to lecture) the readers on the last page. There was no dialogue in the "story". Even with students who did have dialogues in their comics, the language sounded rigid and very "schooled". The dialogues were not something that we would hear in real-life conversations. For example, my Malaysian student told a sad story of a depressed college student who committed suicide and he wanted to raise the readers' awareness about mental health issues among college students. In the first draft of his comic, his protagonist had a phone call conversation with his mother. He said, "Mother, please don't be worried about me." When I asked the student whether he would talk to his mother in that way in real life, he said that he made the sentence sound more "correct", more like what a "real" English-speaking person would say. So, we had a long discussion about what it

means to be a real English-speaking person. I told him that it was okay to use the everyday

English that he used in Malaysia because that would make the story more real and more

touching. In his revised draft, he changed the sentence into "Ma, don't worry-lah" which

presented an interesting feature of Malaysian English where the suffix is used to show

lightheartedness, the protagonist's pretended lightheartedness in this case. Such a small change

brought life into his comic, thus making it both more convincing and appealing to the audience.

It's important to note that the individual conferences played an important role in making the

comic book project a safe space for the students. The project itself does not automatically

provide such a space; it was through genuine dialogue between me and my students about the

value of global and local varieties of English that my students began to feel comfortable and safe

to use those varieties of English in their comic books.

After the individual conferences with all the students, I spent more time in class talking

about the differences between a comic book and an argumentative essay as modes of

communication. As a whole class, we discussed how these different modes of communication

use different ways to persuade readers. For example, we talked about how dialogue can be

persuasive in comics even though they typically do not appear in an argumentative essay or a

research paper. Afterwards, students did peer reviews in groups of three. In the final drafts that

students submitted, I noticed some changes as to students' language use. In addition to the

Malaysian student's use of the suffix "lah", there was a Korean student who used the word

"fighting" in the Korea sense as an expression of encouragement to overcome a difficult

situation. There was a Chinese student who used "out" as in "He is very out" to mean somebody

being old-fashioned. There was another Chinese student who used the expression "people

mountain and people sea" to describe the crowd of parents waiting outside of the school for their

children who were taking College Entrance Exams. These local appropriations of the English

vocabulary and expressions are authentic examples of Englishes used around the world. The

changes that students made in their final drafts, though small, are delightful because they show

students' beginning awareness of the differences in Englishes used in different global contexts

and their deliberate effort to bring the authenticity of the English language into their writing.

Though maybe unconsciously, students were also combatting what Phillipson calls "linguistic

imperialism" with their own global/local Englishes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the possibility of using comics as a way to integrate

global/local varieties of English in ESL writing classes. While introducing my students to the

conventions and norms in standard academic English, I provided students with a space where

they could experiment and explore an unconventional way of communication in the academic

context through the Comic Book Project. On the one hand, students were liberated from the

confines of writing traditional argumentative essays and got an opportunity to present who they

truly are through the voices and stories of the characters in their comics. On the other hand, they

were still expected to be talking about an issue of importance (educational equity) and be

persuasive in their communication (which is one of the expected learning outcomes for the

university writing course). Upon completion of the comic book project, students were able to

achieve several goals: 1) a better understanding of different modes of communication and effective means to make strong arguments according to a specific mode of communication; 2) a heightened awareness of English varieties and their global statuses; 3) increased confidence and pride in using global/local varieties of English in writing.

In future iterations of this assignment, to encourage students even more on bringing global varieties of English into their writing, I will give more specific instructions on my expectations of language use. For example, I will include the use of colloquial and global/local varieties of English as part of the expectations in the writing prompt. Such specification is necessary because after many years in school learning formal and "standard" English, students are understandably afraid to make "mistakes" in their writing. With instructor's emphasis on the value of different varieties of English and how they function in different contexts, it would help students to ease such fear and be more confident and deliberate in their language use. It would also be helpful to give students articles or book chapters (i.e. Amy Tan's novels) to read that demonstrate successful use of varieties of English in writing.

Though my exploration of the use of comics in the college ESL writing class is still preliminary, I was delighted to find the liberating power that it renders the students in terms of bringing the Englishes that they use outside of the classroom into a college writing assignment. I am also excited about the potential that this assignment holds for classrooms with a broader student population, such as immigrant students, generation 1.5 students, and students who speak African-American Vernacular English. In the future, before giving the Comic Book Project as an assignment to the students, I will devote more time in class to introducing students to such

concepts as World Englishes, Global Englishes, code-meshing/switching, translanguaging, etc. I would also like to invite students to discuss the status of American and British English in the world so that we can open dialogues for the value of students' home languages and cultures. I believe that such dialogues will help students develop their confidence in English language use as well as their critical thinking skills, both of which are essential for second language users in achieving academic success.

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