

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Yay! I didn't know that I was a poet:" The Efficacy of Writing Poetry in ESL Classes from a Translingual Approach

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Abstract

Writing poetry is an effective way of teaching in the ESL classroom, especially when approached through the lens of the translingual perspective. This paper introduces the translingual approach to teaching and how ESL teachers of writing can benefit from this approach to teach writing poetry. The paper then provides two practical examples of how to approach teaching writing poetry in the ESL classroom from a translingual perspective. The purpose of this paper, hence, is to argue that writing poetry in the ESL classroom can be a fertile environment that houses different hybrid norms that students bring to the classroom, provides good moments for negotiation, and valorizes creativity. This paper concludes that the translingual approach to writing poetry is less intimidating and more of a hybridity-tolerant way for students to learn English language and to experience the world differently. Poetry becomes a fertile environment for students to perceive language as a hybrid of norms and to learn how to negotiate meanings, structures, and grammar.

Keywords: Creative, efficacy, ESL classroom, negotiations, poetry, translingualism, writing

1. Introduction

Writing poetry in the ESL classroom is usually thought of as difficult to teach or as a genre that can only be taught by trained or talented teachers, let alone those who believe that it is a separate subject. However, it has been argued that poetry is an effective pedagogy to be integrated into ESL/EFL classrooms (Hanauer 2012; Perfect 1999; Peyton et al., 1999; Vardell et al., 2002). In some languages, it is not simple to compose verse since rhythmic languages, like Arabic, for instance, usually require a distinct talent to enable a person to write in verse. This belief, unfortunately, accompanies the learner of English to believe that poetry in English is, also, too difficult to learn. This belief can be dangerously misleading if the learner does not find a teacher who can correct such a misunderstanding. In English, though, writing verse is feasible to almost everyone, due to the abundance of the different types of poetry forms, such as free verse, cinquain, couplet, epigram, haiku, etc., and due to the flexibility of writing poetry in English. Writing poetry in the ESL/EFL classrooms not only can motivate students to learn the language, but also can make them creative learners who learn English in an environment with less learning anxiety.

Writing poetry is a rich learning source that provides opportunities for learners to gain competence in language, content, and social understanding; it encourages learners to play with words, structures, figurative language, and rhythms (Khatib 2011; Linaberger 2004; Peyton et al., 1999; Sullivan, 2005). It paves the way for gaining the competence in languages through negotiating the norm that the students prefer to adopt in their own writing. It is a moment when students are given the chance to write about their experiences and feelings. It is important that ESL teachers become aware of the recent approach of translanguaging and how it can help in teaching poetry to ESL students.

2. The Translingual Approach

Translanguaging is a fairly recent approach to writing; it has been used to approach writing from an angle that treats texts as hybrid, deals with differences as resources, and considers meaning as a negotiation-based outcome (Canagarajah 2013; Krall-Lanoue 2013; Lu and Horner 2013; Sugiharto 2015). Translanguaging approach has yet to consider writing poetry. Writing poetry in the ESL classroom can be a fertile environment that houses different hybrid norms that students bring to the classroom; it can also provide good moments for negotiation while valorizing creativity. Fairly recently, journals in the field of TESOL and applied linguistics started publishing papers that address the translanguaging orientation in the ESL classrooms; this approach is primarily based upon two major pillars. First, it debunks the myth that Standard English is the only norm of English that should be taught in the ESL classrooms and promotes the notion that languages are inherently hybrid. Canagarajah (2013) affirmed that “a translanguaging orientation emphasizes that what we treat as “standard English” or “monolingual” texts are themselves hybrid” (p. 3). Canagarajah (2015) warned against treating Standard English in classrooms as the only correct norm of language that students should not deviate from. He stated that “if Standard English is treated as a stable pre-constructed norm, students may feel intimidated. Worse still, they may adopt it mechanically, feeling that they don’t have spaces for creativity” (p. 426). The second pillar in the translanguaging approach to teaching is the belief that meaning is a negotiation-based outcome, and it is not pre-defined (Canagarajah, 2013). Errors, hence, are not seen as any deviation from Standard English or breaking its rules, as it is seen from the traditional perspectives to teaching English, but are seen as potential moments of learning while preserving the learner’s identity.

The translanguaging approach is student-friendly since it supports diversity, hybridity, and does not set a separation line between the current classroom norm, i.e., Standard English, and norms used by students outside classrooms. Sugiharto (2015) offered a chart that differentiates between the translanguaging approach to writing and the traditional approaches that set Standard English as a norm to be solely taught in the ESL classrooms (p. 130):

Translingual Approach	Traditional Approaches
1. Respect to students’ right to their own language	1. Respect to the dominant language used in academics
2. Texts as fluid	2. Texts as stative
3. Texts as negotiated	3. Texts as autonomous
4. Rhetorical differences as a resource	4. Rhetorical differences as a problem/deficit

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Language learners as language creators 6. In favor of the English-Plus policy (additive) 7. Writing as an open system 8. Writing as a display of complex identities 9. Writing as a spatial temporal phenomenon | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Language learners as passive recipients. 6. In favor of the English-Only Policy (subtractive) 7. Writing as a closed system 8. Writing as a strict conformity of identities 9. Writing as a spatial phenomenon |
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From the above differentiation list, it is noticed that the translingual approach offers more space of fluidity and flexibility in teaching students a second language. We notice that in the translingual approach students are not forced to adapt into the standard norm of English, which is the practical implementation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) resolution that was passed back in 1972:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (Students' Right Resolution, CCCC, 1972)

Scholars of translingualism did not stop at this call but took the idea into further steps where they not only acknowledge other dialects as acceptable but encourage that to the belief that differences are considered as resources not deficits (Krall-Lanoue, 2013; Sugiharto, 2015). Canagarajah (2013) wrote, "the translingual approach also emphasizes difference-in-similarity" (p. 3). That is, it makes us sensitive to creativity and situatedness of every act of communication. It has been a serious problem that many teachers of English think that students' norms are obstacles on the way of learning the "true" norm of English, which is the Standard English. This belief has shifted many learners' goals from acquiring English as a whole language to artificial goals of 'speaking English like a native.' This belief needs to be debunked by the teachers, and awareness should be delivered to learners of English that the goal is not that they copy the American (or British) accent but to learn the language the way that suits them. Teachers should have this belief first; otherwise, they will definitely fail to deliver it to their students. Translingualism is still different from *World Englishes* approach to teaching in that World Englishes acknowledges other varieties of English or English-based creoles either in the outer circle Englishes like Nigerian or Indian English, or in the expanding circle like Saudi or Egyptian English (Kachru 1992), but

translingualism acknowledges individual Englishes, troubles ownership ideology of any norm, and honors negotiation.

Writing poetry in the ESL classrooms is a good training for those who believe that there is nowhere in their curriculum or adopted textbooks that allows them to apply such methods of negotiations and welcomes students' own norms. Those who read and write poetry know that in writing poetry, there is a space, which does not probably exist elsewhere, of flexibility of deviations from the norms and more room for creativity. Translingual approach to teaching writing poetry requires that the teacher allows the students to use their own norms of the language and to codemesh. This approach also requires that the teacher refrains from labelling any deviation from Standard English as an 'error.' Instead, teachers should negotiate students' norms and use the negotiation moments as teaching/learning moments (Krall-Lanoue 2013). Canagarajah (2015) proposes the following pattern for negotiating students' 'errors' (p. 429):

	Error	Student's norm	Dominant norm	Possible reasons for difference
Student A				
Student B				
Etc.				

Canagarajah (2015) affirmed that 'errors' are not 'mistakes' in that 'errors' are systematic and can label "personal grammar" for the students (p. 430). It should be said that translingual approach to teaching writing, poetry in particular, does not enhance any high degree of tolerance toward 'bad writing' nor does it call for any type of ignoring students' different norms. Translingual orientation cares to make students aware of their own deviation/ difference from the dominant norm and to use these moments of negotiation as moments of teaching/learning. It is then up to the students to either adapt themselves to the standard norm or to keep, with awareness, using their own norms that distinguish or preserve their own identities.

Poetry is translingual in its nature; Starz (1995) wrote about poetry saying that it "is another way of communicating which seems to be less threatening to some students. It provides an outlet for creative expression and it helps a shy person communicate with others by taking away the immediate worry of correct punctuation and prose structure" (p. 57). Starz wrote this long before translingualism was theorized, and confirmed that poetry provides a space for learning in a zone that is obligation-free when it comes to 'errors' in punctuation and structure. It also motivates 'shy' students to get engaged in the activity or writing poetry. And this is what translingual approach is dedicated to.

3. Practical Examples

In the following lines, I offer two practical examples of how a teacher can guide moments of teaching students how to write poems from a translingual approach, how to negotiate their un-pre-defined meaning, and how to code-mesh.

Example One: An Imagined Poem of an ESL Student

In an ESL class, a recommended translingual approach to teach writing poetry as a way to teach English is that a teacher starts with a discussion of what poetry is. The teacher should ask students to define poetry and then acknowledges any definition of poetry any student comes up with. The teacher is suggested to write the students' definitions of poetry on the board and start discussing the definitions with the students and how poetry in English may or may not be different from poetry in students' first language. A teacher can, then, show students a prepared PowerPoint of poetry in English, its types, simple figures of speech (like simile, metaphors, etc.), and examples. The teacher can then start pairing or grouping the students in order to discuss poems given by the teacher. Later, a teacher assigns a homework for students to write a poem of their own. Let's imagine that a teacher assigns the following prompt:

Write a poem in which you revive and describe one of your happiest moments. You can use any rhyme scheme pattern we discussed in class or you can write in free verse. You can also code-switch if you think it can better represent who you are or what your (social, religious, etc.) identity is. You are encouraged to write at least 15 lines.

If a student writes the following poem, how can it be negotiated?

I and my family
 Waiting the good news
 To come
 Did I succeed or not yet
 This exam is the most not to undermine

Will it be a joy or calamity
 If my grades is bad, will they find me an excuse
 Finally, the news has come!
 My grades were excellent
 Every one was above cloud nine

I see the happiness in everybody's eyes' tears
 Today for my high school diploma, I took
 Today is the day that was waited for years
 Today, everyone can say *Mabrook*

The student in the above example poem is describing the day she heard the news of graduating from high school, which is considered a nightmare for the whole family in her country. The poem is a good example to show how translingual approach can be used with poetry to make students learn English while accepting their own norms, valuing their own creativity, and not forcing them to stick to the dominant norm of English.

As can be seen in this first draft poem, the student is describing the moment of waiting to hear the news of high school diploma. She is creating her rhyming scheme of ABCDE, ABCDE, ABAB and trying

to fit her words to make the scheme work. She also code-switched in the last word where she used *mabrook* (in Arabic) which means ‘congratulation.’ There is nothing wrong with code-switching/meshing in poetry. Examining the poems of the great poets in the history of English or American literature, we do find examples of code-switching as in T.S. Eliot’s groundbreaking *Four Quartets* where he starts his poem,

τοῦ λόγου δὲ ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοί
ὥς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν (I. p. 77. Fr. 2.)

Translation: [Even though knowledge exists,
many people live as if they had their own wisdom]

Not only did Eliot use Greek in his poem but also other languages. In his masterpiece *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses French and German codes meshed with English.

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du? (V. Tristan und Isolde, I, verses 5-8.)

Translation: [Fresh blows the wind to the homeland

My Irish child, where are you?]

Another example of poets who codeswitch is Sylvia Plath in her celebrated poem *Daddy*. She used German in her poem.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich, [I, I, I, I]
I could hardly speak. (Daddy, 26-28)

Teachers should not blame their students if they hybridize their poems since English, as well as other languages, is itself hybrid. The poem above has deviations from the Standard English, and below I use Canagarajah’s translingual method to negotiate some of the ‘errors’ with the student. I have slightly modified the table to fit me as a teacher and my students.

Error	Student’s norm	Dominant norm	Possible reasons for difference	Decision
Preposition	Waiting the good news	Waiting for or awaiting	Student may not know	Discuss with the student the difference between her norm and the standard norm and don’t lower her grade
Subject-verb agreement	My grades is bad	are bad	Student may have forgotten	
Punctuation	Almost no punctuation marks at all	There should be appropriate punctuation marks	Student does not use punctuation marks in her first language	

The translingual approach to teaching poetry could, indeed, seem controversial for some teachers. But, it is an English teaching method that humanize students and give them the right to their own varieties and norms of language. It is a method that reinforces students' ownership over the language they speak or write. It is not a call to turn a blind eye toward students' errors, but a call to make students aware of what they are doing, what each genre/field is expecting, and then give them the freedom to choose for themselves after they have been introduced to the dominant norm of the language or the genre. In the poem above, any teacher can merely outline the 'mistakes' and ask the student to 'correct' it and that is it. In the translingual approach, the teacher should use this as a moment to negotiate the different norms, to make the student feel that she owns what she writes and has the right to it, and to humanize teaching in a way that does not consider students as machines.

Example Two: A Poem of Twenty Authors

Since many teachers may argue that their students will resist the idea of writing poems claiming that it is too complicated to write. Here is an example of a similar situation. In a university level writing class, I asked my freshman students to write a poem. As usual, students were reluctant and thought they were not talented enough to write poetry. Most of my twenty students said they did not know how to write poetry even after I introduced a PowerPoint presentation about poetry writing and how its several types make it affordable to write. I finally came up with an idea that I was not sure if the same idea has or has not visited other teachers' minds yet. Simply, I asked everybody in class to rearrange the seats and make U-shape class. After everybody did so, I asked them to have a piece of paper, a pen/pencil. I then instructed them to write only one line of poetry with a simple idea or image—I was walking lonely at night, the moon smiled in my face, or any image they can create. I then asked them to pass the sheet into the person on their left-hand side. The job of the other student on the left was to add a new line. This new line is based on the understanding and negotiation of the first line, and then the third student adds a third line based on negotiating and creating meaning from the two lines above, and so on and so forth. The activity would end when every student gets the sheet with his/her name—that means the sheet has taken a complete circle and has been written on by the whole class. Students would then add a line or two to conclude the poem they started. Students loved the idea, especially some of them added a sense of humor or created beautiful images in their lines. The results of this activity were as follows:

a. Negotiation and creating meaning

I saw some students asking others what they meant by this or that word or phrase. They wanted to know in order for them to construct a meaningful idea for the poem. Some students did not. Either way, I saw translingualism in its negotiation notion being practiced. Students did negotiate, did ask, and did interact with their peers about what they meant. In translingualism, meaning is not predefined; it is an outcome of a negotiation process. This helps students develop critical thinking skills in which they realize that they as readers are part of the process of meaning creation. Meaning is not created until they read and negotiate it. It is this deconstructivist approach that opens doors for different interpretations and meanings.

b. *Confidence*

I learned in my classes that whenever I ask students to share their writings with their classmates or outside audience, they are almost all the time feel reluctant to share it; they think their writings are not good enough to be read by others. Now, they do not. They competed to read the poem they contributed to and are part of. They know that they are part of the poem, but other students constitute the rest, so they felt less reluctant to share it. As Canagarajah (2006) stated that multilingual students are “tongue-tied” in class but not outside. Having such activities can help set the students’ tongues free in class.

c. *Awareness not tolerance*

Although translanguaging is not about tolerating mistakes or leaving “errors” uncommented on. The relationship between translanguaging approach to teaching and level of tolerance is usually misunderstood. Some teachers may accuse translanguaging of not being effective when it comes to feedback; however, translanguaging is more effective than other deficit models and traditional approaches. Translanguaging is about building awareness of the dominant norm and other possible ones. It is about making students aware of what they deviated from in the dominant norm without condemning this deviation; we instead negotiate this deviation: its possible reasons; its possible merits; and its demerits, if any.

4. Final Thoughts

This paper was not meant to produce a super model in teaching writing poetry but rather pave the way for more studies that support more effective ideas in teaching writing poetry, not as a goal in itself, but as a more credible and identity-preserving method of learning. Translanguaging approach to writing poetry is less intimidating and more hybridity-tolerant way for students to learn the language and to experience the world differently. Since translanguaging approach is based on ‘negotiations’ when it comes to meaning and considers differences as a resource not a deficit, poetry becomes a fertile environment for students to perceive language as a hybrid of norms and identities—not as a stable sole norm—and to learn how to negotiate their meanings, structures, and experiences. Poems are not only about the images they create or the language features that are used in them but about the moments of negotiation and meaning making they provide. Teachers are recommended to use different types of poems to make the job interesting to students; examples include cinquain, couplet, haiku, object poem, alphabet poem, list poem, group poem, riddle poem, conversation poem, a question poem, bilingual sestina, a letter poem, distorted poem, news poem, or any other poem a teacher can name. Teachers should recommend their students to share their poems with their parents, classmates, or friends. It is indispensable for students to be conveyed the awareness that they have the right to their own language and this can be practically done through poetry, which is the core of the translanguaging approach. Finally, the approach I am providing in this paper raises some questions as well: What can empirical studies say about the effect of using this method in different levels of teaching the language? What do teachers of English need to be equipped with in order to be able to implement this method and use the best of it? How about time dimension? Do teachers really have time

to negotiate norms with students? How about grading? Future research is encouraged to answer such questions to improve this approach and make it feasible.

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