Every Classroom is an ESL Classroom

In a 2006 *College English* article entitled "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition," Paul Matsuda concludes that, although American colleges and universities have not been populated solely by native speakers of English since the mid-nineteenth century, the assumption that all students in a mainstream English composition classroom will be native speakers has persisted in composition instruction well into the twenty-first century. Matsuda explains that the persistence of this belief is largely due to what he refers to as "the policy of containment," meaning the placement of nonnative speakers into alternative, ESL sections of composition. While Matsuda makes clear that these alternative sections are helpful and even preferable for many ESL students and should not be abolished, he argues that instructors should not assume that nonnative speakers of English will not end up in their mainstream courses simply because these sections exist. In response to his assessment of the state of compositionists' approach to ESL students, he concludes his discussion with the following advice:

Instead [of believing the myth of homogeneity], composition teachers need to resist the popular conclusion that follows the policy of containment- that the college composition classroom can be a monolingual space. To work effectively with the student population in the twenty-first century, all composition teachers need to reimagine the composition classroom as the multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language difference is the default (649).
Eli Goldblatt echoes this call for the recognition of diversity in the composition classroom, arguing that composition programs should "bring the margins to the center," because "the most stressed students serve as the best guides about what a program can do." The needs of ESL students, along with transfer students and those with learning disabilities, he says "are not so very different from those of all students: less fragmentation, more individual support, better coordination between students and faculty, a technological environment that provides a maximum of resources and a minimum of surveillance" (15).

I agree with Matsuda and Goldblatt on these points and suggest that composition teachers and program administrators go even further in reconceptualizing the position of their ESL students. In addition to acknowledging the presence of these students and prioritizing their needs, instructors should not view the presence of ESL students as a problem or added difficulty, as many now do largely due to a lack of institutional support in this area. Rather, ESL students' presence should be viewed as an important asset to the composition classroom. In order to facilitate such a repositioning, composition programs must make strides toward providing instructors with the theoretical and practical support necessary to work competently and positively with students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, as this shift is necessary if the field of composition is to remain relevant and responsive to the students it aims to serve.

**Critical Pragmatism in (ESL) Composition: A Writing Across Communities Approach**

As a first step toward revising the common view of ESL students in the composition classroom, it is useful to start with the ongoing debate in composition studies in general, and in ESL composition in particular as to whether or not political issues should be addressed in the classroom. As Xiaoye You notes, some scholars "oppose politicizing [the composition classroom], or explicitly engaging sociopolitical issues related to status quo, power relations, and
social transformations," preferring instead to focus on pragmatic concerns like the basic skills of grammar and organization and, in the case of ESL students, the acquisition of proficiency in English. In response to this argument as posed by Terry Santos, Sarah Benesch argues that "pragmatism is an ideological stance, not a neutral one as its proponents claim [. . . as all educational choices] are mediated by power relations in an institution and in the society and on decision-makers' relation to the status quo: Do they uphold it or question and perhaps change the way things are?" (162). This view is echoed by Victor Villanueva, who argues that in America and in the composition classroom "we are steeped in a colonial discourse, one which continues to operate from a developmental rather than dialectical model - despite our best efforts" (842).

In response to this debate, I argue that a developmental/dialectical model would most effectively address the structural inequalities imposed upon minority students by dominant colonial discourses and assumptions and help to reposition ESL composition students in the classroom, unburdening them from the "problem" label and acknowledging the value of the multiple literacies they bring to the classroom. According to Benesch, "L2 composition does not have to choose between pragmatism and critical teaching. Target-situation demands and students' right to challenge them can be simultaneously addressed through what Pennycook called 'critical pragmatism'" (162). Following this assertion, I advocate for a critical pragmatist approach in the composition classroom based on the belief that ESL students as well as their native English-speaking peers in composition can and should learn grammar, sentence structure, and the conventions of academic and professional discourses in English while simultaneously critically examining the socio-political conditions that make it necessary to learn those things in the first place. This approach to composition instruction is at once progressive and conservative, as it demands attention to the sociopolitical conditions of the classroom as well as some attention to
sentence level elements like grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc., which composition instructors often pass over in order to concentrate on higher order concerns. However, even this back-to-basics approach is rooted in the ideologic stance that aiding students in their quest to attain native-like proficiency in English is an important way that ESL composition instructors can resist the structural inequalities working against their students.

Composition instructors at the University of New Mexico, where I am currently studying and teaching, are fortunate in that there is already a certain level of institutional support for a critical pragmatist approach to instruction in both ESL and mainstream sections of freshman composition, largely due to the influence of WAC. Since its advent in the 1970's, the Writing Across the Curriculum movement has sought to provide continued institutional support for students in response to the writing needs of increasingly diverse student bodies in American universities. The curricular reforms instituted by the national WAC movement, such as the implementation of writing to learn assignments in classes outside of English and the linking of English classes to those in other disciplines, have worked to counter what David R. Russell terms the "myth of transience," (18), the attitude among faculty that the problem of "bad" student writing was not theirs, as they would only have them in class for one semester and then they would move on, which had characterized writing instruction in universities since writing replaced speech as the primary mode of professional and academic communication in the late 19th century. Critical pragmatism aligns with this national Writing Across the Curriculum movement generally and with UNM's revision of WAC, Writing Across Communities, specifically. Born as a contribution to the ongoing academic conversation about WAC and as a response to the desire on the part of UNM English department faculty to better serve the diverse population of students who enter the core writing classrooms of English department graduate
teaching assistants, part-time instructors, and professors each semester, the Writing Across Communities movement, according to Michelle Hall Kells "foregrounds the dimensions of cultural and sociolinguistic diversity [. . . and seeks] ways to connect students' home communities to college literacy" (90). While Writing Across Communities shares many goals with Writing Across the Curriculum, it breaks with the traditional WAC model in focusing on multiple literacies and discourses, rather than solely academic ones. Because of its emphasis on linguistic diversity, WAC at UNM offers unique opportunities for instructors working to engage multiple literacies in the classroom.

**English 101 as English: A Strategic Approach to Foregrounding Linguistic Diversity**

Foregrounding sociolinguistic diversity is not a simple or universally accepted move in composition pedagogy, as multiple complications work against smooth implementation of these topics into classroom discussions, assignments, and activities. For one thing, this move is easily interpreted as political since it challenges the status quo, and composition scholars are not the only stakeholders sensitive to politics in the classroom. Even after the instructor has grappled with this debate and decided that attempting to be apolitical in the classroom is itself a political decision, even if the instructor explains the position she has taken and asserts the belief that to ignore ethnolinguistic diversity in favor of teaching only the conventions of academic discourses is to uphold and reproduce the Eurocentric assumptions that have shaped higher education in America since its beginning, many students are likely to resist this notion, and are well within their right to do so. Also, while students in ESL classes are generally willing to discuss language backgrounds, as Christina Ortmeier-Hooper found, many speakers of English as a second language enrolled in traditional composition courses do not always identify as ESL or want to "out" themselves as nonnative speakers of English for a variety of reasons. Sometimes choose
not to identify themselves as ESL because of a perceived stigma or, in the case of one student Ortmeier-Hooper interviewed, because she felt that teachers who attempted to label her as ESL "singled her out and neglected to see the multiplicity of her identity" (409). In this sense, instructors who draw attention to students' language backgrounds in attempt to position them as assets risk marginalizing their ESL students as much or more than those who characterize them as problems.

Yet, the importance of attention to linguistic diversity remains, and if it is to be foregrounded in the composition classroom it must be for a specific and clearly articulated reason. For me the reason is this: if the purpose of a liberal education is to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic society, then the heterogeneous nature of the society in which they live must be taken into account. For students at UNM, daily life is full of linguistic diversity, but even students in more homogenous communities are likely to come across it in some form or another as they enter the global marketplace in their professional lives. As is often noted, we are now not only local and national but also global citizens. The internet and international corporate businesses are bringing people all over the world into increasingly frequent contact, and English is the language through which this kind of intercultural communication most often occurs. As David Crystal noted in 1987:

"English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports, and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English." (qtd. in McKay, 7)
As speakers of English students have the privilege of access to international spaces, and awareness of this access and of how to negotiate intercultural contact is central to being a responsible citizen in the global village. Also, although native speakers of English have an advantage in the global marketplace, as Carolyn Boiarsky points out, they still need to be aware of ways in which different cultural values impact business communication in English. For business persons and employees alike, she says that "[u]nderstanding the relationship between culture and language has become a requisite for successful business enterprise in the developing global economy" (245). If native and nonnative speakers alike would benefit from studying the relationship between the English language and the many professional, academic, popular and local communities in which it is used, what better place to address this relationship, as well as the historical, social, economic and political forces that have led to the status of English as a default international language, than in the college English classroom? While the primary purpose of freshman English classes is to teach students to write effectively, they do have to write about something as they are learning the conventions of academic and professional written genres. Why not, then, write about English, just as students in history classes write about history, students in anthropology classes write about anthropology, and so forth.

If discussion of English, global Englishes, and linguistic diversity in multiple English-speaking communities is framed in this context its practical value should make the topic less politically charged. Likewise, ESL students will hopefully be less likely to feel pigeonholed or singled out even in mainstream classes since, in the context of the class, everyone will be asked to interrogate their own language backgrounds and linguistic identities. Through this conversation, hopefully the value and complexity of each student's linguistic background will emerge.
Practical Approaches

While there are a multitude of ways to study the relationship between English and culture(s) in composition classes, I think that focus on individuals as strategic communicators in English would be appropriate for UNM. Through a sequence of assignments, composition students can identify pressing local issues relevant to them and attempt to address them in their writing assignments. This strategy would work at UNM specifically because, as I mentioned previously, New Mexico is very diverse, with many ESL students coming from local communities. Thus, as students conduct research on their chosen topics they will be likely to encounter people with language backgrounds different from their own even if they research questions not directly related to language issues. In class, strategies for communicating effectively with audiences from diverse cultures and backgrounds regarding the issues students have identified as important to them could be the focus of lectures, discussions, and activities. Throughout the semester the instructor and students will focus on grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization, genre conventions, etc., not in isolation but in the context of larger projects aimed at connecting the skills students learn in class to the nonacademic communities to which they belong.

Ideally, at least one of the documents that the students produce will reach an audience outside of the classroom. At UNM, Writing Across Communities and the core writing program already provide regular opportunities for students to engage with members of the university and local communities, and are in the process of creating more. Literacy events like the Civil Rights Symposium, which WAC has hosted three times in the past two years, provide students with opportunities to engage in and reflect upon intercultural communication. The Symposium, conceived of as a civic literacy event invites students, staff, and faculty from multiple
departments in the university as well as community members including politicians, community organization representatives, and high school students to deliberate together regarding local and national current events and issues. Here students not only have the opportunity to listen to featured speakers but to exercise rhetorical agency themselves in roundtable conversations. These kinds of events, combined with other avenues like linked composition courses, service learning projects, and membership in student organizations, if incorporated carefully by instructors into composition courses, offer both ESL and mainstream students the opportunity to draw upon the communication skills they study and practice in class in order to engage in and reflect upon purposeful intercultural communication, a skill that they will hopefully continue to use in their lives outside of the classroom.
Works Cited


