

## Lessons for WAC/WID from Language Learning Research: Multicompetence, Register Acquisition, and the College Writing Student

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**Abstract:** This article is a collaboration between WAC/WID and second language acquisition (SLA) specialists. It examines alternate disciplinary notions of the place of writing among other skills and adapts concepts from SLA theory and pedagogy with the goal of providing new interdisciplinary options for WAC/WID research and classroom practice.

In WAC/WID theory, the transition of college students into disciplinary discourse communities has often been compared to learning a new language: students need to master new lexicon, structures, and genres while acculturating to new ways of thinking and engaging. But Paul Kei Matsuda and Jeffrey Jablonski have cautioned that this "L2 [second language] metaphor" often elides the experiences of students who literally are still in the process of acquiring English. If we take this objection to the "new language" metaphor seriously, then we must find more precise ways of describing the progress of students toward proficiency as a linguistic act. The present essay, a collaboration between WAC/WID and language learning professionals, turns to recent developments in second language acquisition theory and adapts them to the pedagogical situation faced by instructors in writing courses in the disciplines. The goal is to better describe the linguistic and rhetorical situation faced by students—all students, not just "multilingual" students—in WAC/WID courses.

What does the discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) have to offer WAC/WID professionals and classroom faculty? We have several answers, suggesting that WAC/WID should interact with SLA in order

1. to consider a different approach to the place of writing in higher education pedagogy: in its concerns with literacy and its embrace of language as an expression of, an enactment of, and a window into culture, SLA is less likely than WAC/WID to consider "writing," however broadly conceived, as a magic bullet transforming pedagogy. At the same time SLA integrates writing in a more balanced way, addressing multiple skills and proficiencies—which may be part of the wave of the future for writing pedagogy.

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2. to better understand the experiences and abilities of the growing population of students with complex language backgrounds. We'll explore the concept of "multicompetence" as a means toward developing descriptions of linguistic use and identity more nuanced than "monolingual" vs. "multilingual."
3. to suggest at least one new area of joint research: "register acquisition." Interaction between WAC/WID and SLA offers an opportunity to re-examine the goals of discipline-specific writing courses, as suggested by Guadalupe Valdés and others.
4. to develop an interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis, drawing on WAC/WID, SLA, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, rhetoric & composition, and especially on recent developments in the notion of linguistic "competence," ranging from a new definition of "multicompetence," to emerging concepts such as "plurilinguistic competence," and "translinguality."
5. to suggest practical pedagogical ideas for WAC/WID instructors based on language learning theory and classroom practice.

Our goal is not only to describe the experience of multilingual students or to provide "mainstream" instructors with techniques for addressing the needs of the recent influx of these L2 users, important as that is. We suggest that it may be best to begin to think about the increasing representation of multilingual students in our WAC/WID courses not as a "problem" to be "solved" but rather as a potential resource that can enable us to address some of the most intractable issues in discipline-specific literacy instruction—for *all* students, including monolingual ones. Rather than asking what sorts of additional—i.e. remedial—measures multilingual students might require in order to function more like a monolingual or native speaker of English, perhaps the question is better phrased as: what can we, as WAC professionals and as WID instructors, learn from the process of language acquisition in which these students are already engaged? How can we leverage the language learning tools they have already developed in other contexts into the service of our pedagogical goals, whether in particular assignments, in individual courses, or in the curriculum of a major course of study?

We will argue that multilingual students' success in acquiring at least a second language provides them with transferable skills that enable them more easily to acquire new academic registers in WAC/WID courses. But in order to help students access and apply these skills in the new contexts into which we are introducing them, it is vital that WAC/WID professionals, and the classroom faculty whom they mentor and support, gain at least a basic understanding of how the language acquisition process works, what modern language instructors do in the classroom, and how some of these techniques might be re-purposed in the discipline-specific writing course. Rather than regarding the task of higher education as assimilating multilingual students to a monolingual norm, we propose to use multilingual students' experiences, and recent developments in SLA research, as foundational elements in a paradigm attempting to describe what *all* students are doing in their undergraduate education.<sup>[1]</sup>

## I. Does SLA Conceive Literacy Differently from WAC/WID? Situating Writing among a Balance of Multiple Skills

At the core of the WAC/WID project is the pedagogical argument that language is intimately involved with learning. WAC/WID advocates have sought to convince colleagues across the disciplines that it is impossible to teach "content," to transmit domain knowledge, without also attending to the reading and writing processes through which that knowledge is constructed, debated, disseminated, and

interpreted. WAC pedagogy resists a definition of writing which reduces it to just the production of text per se—sometimes even further reduced to mere grammatical correctness—and replaces it with an expansive definition which also includes reading, critical thinking, and research.

Precisely because we conceive the type of language use with which we are concerned as a higher-order intellectual concern, college writing studies in English have tended to assume that their students are no longer involved in anything that might be construed as "language learning," and so we have not paid much attention to the research literature surrounding second language acquisition (SLA). Students at the WAC/WID level are presumed already to have acquired English, and anyway we tend to conceive ourselves as writing teachers, or as content specialists who happen to be teaching discipline-specific writing, rather than as language teachers.

It may initially seem an unusual idea to examine the literature of second language acquisition research as a source of insight about the development of student writers, because historically SLA has been ambivalent about the place of writing in its pedagogical objectives. Guadalupe Valdés et. al. noted that, as of 1992, "most [foreign language] professionals have taken the position that writing is a 'secondary' or less crucial skill than listening, speaking, and reading" (p. 333). Melinda Reichelt (1999) traces a historical development from 1) a conscious effort, during the 1970s and 1980s, to devalue what was perceived as a traditional "writing bias" in an effort to move toward a more direct method of instruction which put highest value on audio-lingual skills (p. 187) toward 2) an opposing trend, beginning in the mid- to late-1990s, toward more attention to writing in the foreign language classroom, often recommending the adoption of process-oriented models drawn from "L1" [first language] composition pedagogy (pp. 188-189). Up to this point it may seem that there might be little for WAC/WID to borrow from SLA research, since the movement was merely a few steps toward an approach to writing pedagogy that is already very familiar to most WAC/WID practitioners.

But recent developments offer a way forward for WAC/WID—and for composition as well—as we seek to move toward what might be called a post-process writing pedagogy. Within SLA, the work of Guadalupe Valdés has been important in challenging the profession to examine ways both to teach and to study language learning beyond the levels customarily addressed in the first few semesters of study. As early as 1992, Valdés and her collaborators noted that the then-current proficiency standards for writing in a second language assumed that, at the "mid-intermediate level," for example: "Writing tends to be a loose collection of sentences or sentence fragments on a given topic and provides little evidence of conscious organization" (Valdés, Haro, and Arriarza, 1992, p. 339). In challenging this assumption, Valdés et. al. note that most of their U.S. students had at least some instruction and proficiency in English-language writing:

Is it really the case... that students who can write coherent and cohesive English prose will begin by writing a loose collection of sentence fragments in a target language? Do we assume that a limitation in language (e.g., vocabulary or syntax) makes them disregard their knowledge about paragraph organization, characteristics of different genres, and the like? What evidence is there that, left to their own devices, students will begin by merely transcribing memorized material? Might it be the case instead that, if they were allowed to write spontaneously without concern for mechanical accuracy, they would use all the resources they have in their first language plus the knowledge they acquired in the target language in order to communicate real meanings? (Valdés, Haro, and Arriarza, 1992, p. 340)

Both the 1992 study of student writing and classroom teachers who have since applied these principles have found that even at beginning levels students tend to write in complete sentences and

paragraphs, that they try to develop arguments and coherent narratives in writing, and that language teachers in L2 can build lessons on literacy skills acquired in L1.

Their suggestion, then, is that writing knowledge can transfer to language knowledge. What we are suggesting here is that the reverse may also be true. For students and their WAC/WID instructors, the potential is that language knowledge—or familiarity with the process of language learning—can transfer to the process of learning new discipline-specific registers of academic English. Therefore it is important that we attend to the development of "a literacy-based approach to language teaching."<sup>[2]</sup>

The history of SLA over the past half-century is an experience with gradually finding ways to balance multiple skills in its pedagogical approach. Haneda (2007) describes recent calls within SLA for situating literacy in a much more central role in foreign language instruction. During the past decade, the trend has been to synthesize theoretical perspectives drawn from fields such as educational linguistics, genre theory, and literacy studies—moving away from, or at least beyond, the process writing pedagogy approach to bring in perspectives from other fields.

WAC/WID professionals understandably have tended to portray the introduction of more writing in a classroom as a magic bullet, transforming pedagogy profoundly. But what the preceding discussion of the experience of SLA pedagogy as it has developed over the past fifty years suggests is that one reason *whymore* writing works in helping students understand content is because it provides a better *balance* of critical learning skills than traditional lecture/note-taking models. We can then go to the next step of asking: are there other skills, other aspects of students' experiences, including experiences with and in other languages, that may help them to learn more effectively?

## II. Are Multilingual Students "Different" from Monolinguals? Multicompetence and the College Student

Two male college students, Diego and George, are walking down a street, laughing and discussing, in slangy English, an amusing incident from a party the previous night. Suddenly a third, older man approaches and addresses Diego in Spanish. Diego, a bit startled, replies noncommittally, then switches to English to try to include George, but the third man, after a couple of halting sentences in English, switches back to Spanish. "He's my uncle," Diego explains to George. "Go on into Starbucks and get me a Tall Soy Misto and I'll be right in." Diego's uncle shows him an official letter which he doesn't understand; Diego tries to explain it to him, then decides to call his girlfriend, who works for a lawyer who might help. When she answers the phone, he flirts with her briefly in Spanish before switching over to English to present his uncle's problem. His girlfriend tells him to hold on, and in a few moments puts the lawyer on the phone, and George explains the case in polite, formal English, and thanks him profusely for his explanation. Then he hangs up and explains the issue in Spanish to his uncle, who, satisfied, thanks him and goes on his way. Diego rejoins George in Starbucks and asks him whether he knows if the midterm in Anthropology 101 will be essay or multiple choice, and whether "notions of kinship" will be on the test.

It's a type of scene that is repeated millions of times every day on streets, in offices, in living rooms, on campuses in the United States and around the world. How many different ways did Diego need to communicate in the course of a few minutes? He used two languages, several dialects of each (e.g. young male bonding, formal request for a legal explanation in English; flirting Spanish with his girlfriend and familial Spanish with his uncle), and several specialized registers employing technical terms showing membership in particular communities of practice (e.g., generic college student talk, discipline-specific Anthropology terminology, Starbucks-ese). He code-switched between English and Spanish (and between flirting informally and a more formal request for her help) with his

girlfriend on the phone, and tried to do so with his uncle, though that negotiation turned out differently. Then he had to translate what he had learned from the lawyer to his uncle. What Diego did was demonstrate what linguists call multicompetence, his adaptability and functionality in two different language codes and several dialects and registers of each.

The traditional concept of multicompetence, as originated by Vivian J. Cook in the 1990s, turns on a distinction between the monolingual mind and the multilingual mind. Cook initially described multicompetence as "the compound state of a mind with two grammars" or more generally as "the notion that people who know two languages are different from monolinguals" (1992, p. 557). Cook examines evidence suggesting that L2 users differ from monolinguals in a) knowledge of the L1, b) advanced knowledge of the L2, c) metalinguistic awareness, and d) cognitive processes (1992 pp. 559-565).

This question of "difference" is central to the pedagogical situation that we face as college writing teachers at all levels. Do multilinguals learn differently from monolinguals? Do they read differently, write differently? Most crucially, do they need to be taught differently?

Many students in today's higher education fit traditional notions of neither bilinguality nor monolinguality. For example, in a recent language background survey on a public urban university campus, only 31% of students identified as monolingual, while 25% described themselves as equally comfortable in English and another language. An additional 35% described themselves as more comfortable in English though they use another language regularly and speak it fluently (Hall, 2012). In making use of a non-English language for some purposes, these students would definitely qualify as beyond Cook's "point of emergence" for multicompetence, the threshold where "there is language knowledge of an L2 that is not simply assimilated by the L1, such as lexical borrowing" (1992, p. 581). These students have a wide range of language proficiencies, experiences, and habits, so it is difficult to generalize about them based on this data. But perhaps as we search for new pedagogical insights into how best to serve these multicompetent students, we can draw some clues from SLA research and its concomitant theoretical use in adjacent fields.

Cook's original concept of multicompetence has received perhaps its most vigorous reconfiguration from Joan Kelly Hall, An Cheng, and Matthew T. Carlson (2006) as a much more dynamic and usage based notion of language. The most radical move in this new theory of multicompetence is to take social activity, rather than language code, as a starting point. That is, what creates Cook's "compound state of mind" is not the distinction between "monolingual" vs. "multilingual" in itself, but rather "the amount and quality of exposure to variable linguistic forms, and, more generally, the unique social contexts and pragmatically-based communicative activities that individuals encounter in the process of becoming multilingual" (p. 230). The key suggestion here is that categories like "English speakers" or "native speaker" or "monolingual" are too broad to be of much use; the mere fact of sharing a certain "language code" does not tell us what we need to know about the linguistic abilities of L1/L2 users. To ascertain that, one would have to observe learners as they perform language tasks and skills in the context of their "social activity": the multiple contexts, registers, and dialects which they use on a daily or occasional basis. One of those contexts, for example, might be the writing intensive classroom.

This new version of multicompetence sets a very different "point of emergence," examining

the differences across users based not on number of languages, but on amount and diversity of experiences and use. Thus, even monolinguals—as conventionally defined in the literature on multicompetence—can be considered to be multicompetent (p. 230).

So perhaps we are all multicompetent, insofar as none of us live our whole lives in one linguistic context, with access to one dialect, operating within one community of practice. All of us are more or less competent at negotiating different degrees of difference, managing to communicate in one or more language codes and various dialects and sub-dialects, registers and sub-registers, genres and sub-genres, in multiple rhetorical situations.

Another of Cook's contributions was to focus on what he called "L2 users," as opposed to "L2 learners"—which implied that there is an end-point where one is no longer learning a language but has instead attained a permanent plateau of adult proficiency—or to "L2 speakers"—which tended to privilege one particular mode of language use, the oral over the written. The conception of multicompetence opens us up to consider various types of language use short of the unattainable ideal of "balanced bilinguality" with two fully and equally developed language "systems." But Valdés (2005) suggests that we need to go a step further, and to consider what she calls, writing in the context of "heritage language learners," "L1/L2 users." Valdés points us toward a notion of a student's whole range of linguistic competence and communicative activities in various language codes, dialects, and registers. Students are not merely learning an L2 and learning to write in it academically; they continue to engage in various other language activities which involve different variations of both the L2 and the L1—and these activities and competencies will influence what they do when faced with a writing assignment in our classrooms.

Taken together, these ongoing language activities that students engage in—academic and nonacademic, L1 or L2 or L3 or Lx, in various dialects and registers and genres and rhetorical situations—comprise the resources, the total "communicative repertoire" (TCR) (Hall, Cheng, and Carlson, p. 232) upon which a student will initially draw when faced with a writing assignment in a WAC or WID course. Equally significant for WAC/WID is the suggestion of "replacing the notion of language groups with that of *communities of practice*," defined as "social groups composed of individuals who come together for shared purposes that are organized around, for example, social, familial, or professional goals" (Hall, Cheng, and Carlson, p. 232 ).<sup>[3]</sup> WAC/WID theory has, of course, long drawn on the ideas of "discourse communities" or "disciplinary communities," but multicompetence theory offers us a way to conceptualize these communities more fully by providing terms to describe the linguistic elements of engaging with and becoming part of these communities.

If we think of L1/L2 users (or, for that matter, L1 users) in WAC/WID courses as possessing varying "communicative repertoires," we can investigate the equally diverse ways in which they deploy these "semiotic resources for taking action" by applying such terms as "reorganization, redirection, expansion, and transformation" (Hall, Cheng, and Carlson, p. 232). Theoretically, a language user's communicative repertoire in a given language could derive from any type of experience she has had in that language: informal conversations, formal classroom instruction, texts read, texts produced either spontaneously or in response to an assignment, various media accessed (movies, television, etc.) etc. Obviously if we tried to describe this exhaustively we would never complete the task, because we would have to encompass a language user's entire life in the language in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; we would have to describe both registers and dialects in which the user can actively produce examples (and various degrees of this) and those which she can only passively recognize and possibly describe. This task is obviously infinite and therefore impossible, but fortunately it is also beside the point, because we are talking about acquisition of a particular register, which is always going to take place in a situated context. Although theoretically a user could call upon any linguistic experience in her entire lifetime to be deployed, in practice most competent users will limit themselves to the most relevant ones. That is, part of being a successful language user—and nearly all language users are more successful than not—is being able to recognize previous communicative experiences which are to some extent similar to the task at hand.



If a language user's Total Communicative Repertoire is equal to all spoken and written experiences, both passive and active, in all the languages and dialects she speaks, reads, writes and understands (to various degrees), her Active Communicative Repertoire comprises that subset of the the TCR that is accessed during a particular linguistic action, such as writing a paper in response to an assignment. A student's competence in a particular register is neither fixed nor easily standardizable. Rather all the characteristics of a register are negotiable, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the goals of the course, the instructor's own relation to the discipline, the rigidity (or not) of the disciplinary conventions, the student's own personal predilections to experiment with conventions or attempt to reproduce them literally or to challenge them. Thus the student's communicative repertoire includes not only situations with which she may have experience or familiarity, but also a collection of strategies for evaluating register knowledge, and for establishing a relation to the conventions of that register.

The Active Communicative Repertoire for a particular task consists of:

- Experiences, in any language, dialect, or register that are at least potentially relevant
- Models provided either by instructors or through students' own reading
- Strategies, both conscious and unconscious, that the student has developed—or is learning to develop in the context of a particular course—for recognizing register parameters and making language choices based on them.

The key for instructors then is that any student writing is going to be built, in the first instance, on her existing total communicative repertoire, and we need to set ourselves the task of helping her to activate relevant aspects of it—and perhaps to deactivate others.

### III. Activating the Communicative Repertoire: Writing in the Disciplines as Register Acquisition

Dialogue with second language acquisition research provides WAC/WID an opportunity to re-think what "writing" is, to view a student's "writing proficiency" not as a static, easily transferable ability, but rather as a dynamic collection of competencies, at various levels, in a variety of contexts and registers. This new view of multicompetence also challenges any easy dichotomy between "monolingual" and "multilingual" students, and asks us to reconsider what we consider to be "mainstream" in our classes (Hall, 2012). The next step is clearly to explore what SLA pedagogical theory and classroom practice might offer us as we re-work the way we teach writing to students in disciplinary courses.

An especially promising area for conceptual collaboration between WAC/WID and SLA concerns the area of "heritage language learners," or what Valdés (2005) suggests should more precisely be described as "L1/L2 users." This reconception of dual language usage helps her to re-conceive second dialect (D2) and register (R2) acquisition as legitimate areas of SLA research:

If the goal of heritage language instruction for L1/L2 users who are acquiring a D2 is also for them to extend their repertoires to include styles and registers of the heritage language appropriate for communicating in academic or professional settings, instruction must be based on an understanding of the acquisition of additional registers by monolingual speakers who have not had access to contexts in which these particular registers are used. The instructional goal to be achieved in this case is the acquisition of

additional registers (R2 acquisition), that is, a set of discourse practices that are directly tied to values and norms of a particular social group. (Gee, 1990, p. 418)

Valdés suggests that language-learning research can contribute to this field. But investigating how students who already speak a particular language—that is, certain dialects or registers of it—move toward acquisition of academic register(s) as an R2...Rx is also, we submit, squarely within the WAC/WID conceptual domain, and needs to be considered a priority for future research. Such a priority offers significant opportunities a) to shed light on the processes of learning to read and write at advanced levels, and b) to provide practical guidance and professional development resources to classroom instructors.

Acquisition of an academic register, then, should be both less drastic and more subtle than acquiring an entire new language. Matsuda and Jablonski are correct in worrying that attending to the "L2 metaphor" for disciplinary initiation might obscure the experience of students who are literally acquiring English. When we focus on register acquisition, we are investigating the discourse experience of language users who already have some experience—and usually extensive experience—with the language in question. That is, they already possess a communicative repertoire that includes at least some experience with multiple dialects and registers in the language of which the target register is a part.

So what do we mean by an academic "register" in the WID classroom? Perhaps the concept is best explained by reference to two concepts which may be more familiar within Writing in the Disciplines theory and practice. When discussing how best to convey to students how writing is done in a particular discipline, the concept of *genre* is frequently employed as a first step: the instructor will discuss how particular forms of writing (e.g. a lab report, a case study, a close reading) are structured within a discipline, sometimes with the benefit of an outline or even a template denoting sections such as "materials and methods," "discussion," etc.<sup>[4]</sup> Other terms often employed include *discourse community* (Swales, 1990, pp. 24-27) or *disciplinary community* (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p. 47), denoting an area of social practice—in this case an academic one—with certain agreed-upon ideas about what counts as knowledge, what types of evidence are acceptable or not, which frameworks and ideas are foundational within a field. The concept of *register* may be thought of as mediating between these two concepts, instantiating them in concrete, situated language choices. With relation to genre, register is the collection of linguistic codes which when combined in the shape of a genre, fill in that shape and give it detailed meaning. With relation to the disciplinary community, register is the means by which the values and procedures of the community are expressed and inculcated in specialized language.

If register involves the *language* that is used within a discipline, then the techniques that are used for teaching a language to new speakers/writers might be of use to instructors in the WID classroom. Specifically, we believe that three important principles derived from SLA classroom practice are of particular relevance in helping students to acquire particular academic registers:

1. **Know your students.** In all courses, it's important to begin from where the students are, but in language learning—including the learning of an academic register—determining an appropriate starting level for instruction is crucial. Instructors make certain assumptions about student preparation based on such factors as designated prerequisites within the curriculum, but these assumptions need to be tested by gathering information on students' experiences that are relevant to the course, including both content (e.g. previous courses in the field) and competencies (e.g. previous experience with academic writing). A brief survey, perhaps on the first day of class, can quickly help an instructor characterize the current class of students—and every class is different—with regard to their preparation. When combined



with a brief writing sample, graded according to a standard rubric, such a survey can give a very specific portrait of a student's baseline at the beginning of the course in terms of academic reading and writing experience, as well as domain knowledge.

2. **Provide opportunities for students to *practice and perform in the target register*.** In the WID classroom, writing instruction is sometimes limited to a specification of the projected genre: the characteristics of a lab report, case study, or literary analysis. This is useful and indeed vital, but it is not sufficient merely to present even a detailed structure. Rather, students need to be provided with multiple, scaffolded opportunities to make that structure their own. Such exercises as asking students to combine two simple declarative sentences into a more complex one which makes a discipline-specific distinction or demonstrates a rhetorical move can help students to begin to acquire the target register at a level that is both detailed and internalized. Such practice needs to be followed up with multiple opportunities to perform in the target register—not just once at the end of the course, but in a structured series of more complex applications of the lessons that have been presented and practiced.
3. **Activate prior registers and knowledge.** This final principle follows directly from the line of research that we have been presenting here, so let's explore it in a bit more detail by returning to the hypothetical student we discussed earlier.

Our friend Diego, you'll recall, is a student who is multicompetent in a variety of registers in English and Spanish. He recognizes that different communicative situations, different audiences, different interactions, call for deployment of different resources from his communicative repertoire. Given this sophisticated repertoire of options in spoken communication, his response when faced with a new writing assignment may seem puzzling. On a recent assignment in a junior-level research writing course, Diego was asked to produce what was termed an "Objective Synthesis" in which students looked for common threads or "themes" in several assigned readings. But Diego's first draft was neither "objective" nor a "synthesis": instead it was based on a thesis-driven model which excluded all themes in the readings that did not support the thesis, and his treatments of the readings consisted of successive summaries. What went wrong here?

Clearly Diego recognized that this assignment was congruent with certain assignments that he had encountered in his first-year composition course, but had not recognized the ways in which the new register in which he was supposed to be writing differed from his previous model. In contrast with genre, which is only recognizable after examining a whole text, a register should be evident on a sentence-by-sentence basis: in the choice of words, in the length and characteristic structure of sentences, in the tone, in the transitions, in the way that evidence is introduced and commented upon, in the ways that previous research is referenced, discussed, criticized, or built upon. How can the instructor help Diego to avoid making this kind of mistake? One part of the answer is that she can't and shouldn't: making mistakes, accepting them and learning from them, is an integral part of the register acquisition process. Perhaps the intervention needs to occur after the first draft. But the other part of the answer is that an explicit description of the target register—in this case, the taking of an objective stance, close reading of the text, and working toward synthesis—might help to head off misconceptions, and that focused practice in producing the type of text that is desired—exercises focused on moving from summary to synthesis, for example—may accelerate the process of student learning. What would also help Diego is if the instructor could provide examples of what a synthesis looks and sounds like, on a sentence-by-sentence basis, perhaps by providing side-by-side passages that do and do not fit the criteria, and soliciting student attempts to explain the distinctions. Learning to tell the difference *is* the process of acquiring a register.

The first step, indeed, may be to get Diego to recognize that he already knows what a register is. His demonstrated multicompetence in two languages and various registers shows that he understands

that language needs to be modulated depending on the particulars of the communicative situation, but when he turns to writing he seems to forget this and falls back on a one-size-fits-all model. As a student with a knowledge of Spanish, Diego has multiple experiences of register built right into the language; as a starter, one might ask him to think about his process of decision-making when he uses the informal *Tú* vs. the formal *Usted*, the rapid-fire evaluation of the current social and rhetorical situation in the context of his internalized cultural knowledge.

Multilingual students like Diego, based on long-term, real-world exposure to sophisticated linguistic decisions, often have a well-developed sense of register, which needs to be activated and transferred to the WID context and to the mode of writing. Monolingual English speakers, by contrast, may need to build an awareness of register from the ground up, as the modern enforced informality of U.S. social norms tends to blur oral registers—though not erase them completely; even "monolingual English speakers" still are, in fact, multicompetent in various registers in everyday life—workplace registers, family registers, peer group registers, school registers. These students may also be more fully attuned to U.S. educational norms for writing than students whose educations may have partly taken place in other countries and cultures. These two groups of students have much to teach each other when they come together in the WID classroom, and instructors would be well advised to find innovative ways of leveraging their complementary attributes. For example, working together on peer critiques or collaborative writing projects could provide opportunities for both sets of students to expand their communicative repertoires and activate prior experiences and knowledge of appropriate registers.

Both the L1/L2 user and the L1 monolingual will formulate any new textual task in terms of their existing communicative repertoire, at least initially. As we saw in the case of Diego above, this first approximation may very likely be off the mark to some extent. The instructor's task for nurturing the feedback/revision loop, then, is to find ways of quickly evaluating how close the student's initial approximations have been to the target register, and then coaching the student toward a more sophisticated understanding of the tools required. The student's rhetorical energy needs to be redirected.

Consider the example of a sophomore-level, general education, writing intensive course that is a survey of American literature from "the beginning" to the Civil War. The instructor will need to help students activate—and then adapt—various registers which may be present in their communicative repertoires. For example, students will encounter many texts that reference Biblical passages or figures, invoke divine authority, or employ rhetorical approaches such as close explication or genres such as sermons with which some students may have some independent familiarity from their own religious or cultural experience. This knowledge will give them a leg up in understanding the texts, but it may be necessary to curb the students' natural impulse to reproduce the type of response that might be appropriate in a Bible study group but not in an academic situation. In order to help students like Diego navigate their writing assignments, WID instructors, who are often immersed almost unconsciously in their disciplinary communities, need to find more explicit terms for talking about the target register(s).

For non-specialists, the term *register*, if it comes up at all, usually arises in fairly simple distinctions between "formal" vs. "informal" register, or as a description of, for example, "legal register." But there are multiple legal registers—genres such as contracts, legal letters, briefs, etc. each have their corresponding registers. Similarly academic disciplines consist of multiple related registers and sub-registers. Members of such communities are skilled at navigating the various registers required in different contexts: the journal article, the conference paper, the informal discussion between colleagues, the dialogue between editors and authors, the classroom genres of syllabus, assignment, examination; the textbook, the dissertation proposal, etc. Such differences are a crucial part of the

process of knowledge-making in any discipline. It is difficult to imagine a field which had only one register—it is the reformulating from register to register which helps to move knowledge forward. For linguists, the most immediate association would be with Halliday's (1985/1989) model which conceives register as an interplay between **field** (the activity in the text, the content in the discourse), **tenor** (the relation between reader and writer in terms of status, experience in the field), and **mode** (which describes both the physical and rhetorical characteristics of the text, whether written/spoken, online/printed, feedback from audience or not, etc. Or even more simply, the *What?* the *Who?* and the *How?* of a given text.

To see how these distinctions could be useful in the WID classroom, let's consider an upper-level writing intensive course, "Writing as a Biologist," at a large state university. The first writing assignment asks students to explain a complex biological concept "to your grandmother" (assuming that she doesn't have a degree in Biology!). Students often have trouble with this assignment, however, for two reasons. First, they have often never been called upon to write about biological issues at all before; their previous experience has been to reproduce snippets of knowledge on multiple choice exams, or to produce template-driven lab reports. The initial challenge here is to help students to activate knowledge that was first acquired passively, perhaps through preparatory informal writing assignments. The second challenge is helping students to rhetoricize their knowledge: they need to figure out how to communicate their understanding of the concepts to a particular audience who has a limited background in the material. By manipulating the register context, the instructor creates a situation in which students need to re-purpose material acquired in an academic context—and, in the process, to make it their own. By foregrounding the mode and especially the tenor in this assignment, the instructor implicates the students in an operation of translation, re-packing, moving detailed disciplinary knowledge beyond the boundaries of the disciplinary community. But those values are still part of what must be conveyed even in this altered register.

As Valdés suggests, the process of acquiring a register is somewhat parallel to that of acquiring a language, and the trend within SLA during the last two decades has been increasingly to recognize that learning a new language is learning a new culture, and to insist that one cannot teach language without teaching culture. The reverse is also true: you can't teach culture without teaching language. This insight helps to provide an answer as to why a "content" instructor should care about WID: teaching "content" is really a process of socializing the student into the culture of the discipline—what counts as knowledge, what kinds of arguments carry weight and don't, what procedures are common to the disciplinary community—and all of this epistemological and social information is encoded in complex ways into the register(s) of the discipline, the range of variability in format and conventions that are tolerated (or not), the connotations of specialized lexicon, the historical resonance of concepts which have been developed and altered over time by formal and informal linguistic interaction among members of the community. The language of the discipline *is* the discipline, and acquisition of the disciplinary register(s) is the surest indicator that a student is ready for provisional membership in that community and participation in that ongoing conversation.

#### IV. Toward a New WAC Literacy: What are the Elements of an Interdisciplinary Synthesis?

The idea that we need to concern ourselves in any way with what students do or do not do in other languages—or for that matter what they do in English outside of campus, or even what they do in other disciplines in college—may bother some WAC/WID faculty: shouldn't our exclusive focus remain on academic English writing? And it is certainly the case that traditionally most of our writing

pedagogy for L2 writers has been geared toward making them more like L1 writers, more like monolinguals, more like a "native speaker." The underlying assumption here has been that students' future literacy experiences will likely involve principally reading and writing interactions that are in English and with monolingual "native" speakers. This assumption may or may not once have been valid, but as the world becomes more globalized, as English emerges as a lingua franca, as our students themselves increasingly bring complex linguistic backgrounds and histories to their academic literacy efforts,<sup>[5]</sup> this monolingual ideal becomes more and more untenable as an adequate educational objective.

So what then should be the goal of a new WAC literacy? A decade and a half ago, the New London Group (1996) presciently described the future of what they called "multiliteracies":

Local diversity and global connectedness...mean that the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects; variations in register that occur according to social context; hybrid cross-cultural discourses; the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers; different visual or iconic meanings; and variations in the gestural relationships among people, language, and material objects. (p. 69)

If these are the key objectives of multiliteracy education, then the new paradigm for our WAC pedagogy will no longer emphasize the goal of making multilingual students more like monolingual students, but rather, if we have to choose, that of making monolinguals more like multilinguals, even if they do not learn a new language code. For students who are already multilingual, our goal should be to help them to become more aware of, to draw upon, to apply, and to further develop their skills in negotiating multiple literacy situations using various parts of their communicative repertoires.

As we discussed above, the new conception of multicompetence calls into question the traditional bifurcation between "monolinguals" and "multilinguals": perhaps no one is truly limited to one language, and thus perhaps we are all "multilingual,"<sup>[6]</sup> or at least multicompetent. But if the distinction retains any meaning at all, there are two things that "multilinguals" can be said to have in common: (a) that they have learned another language;<sup>[7]</sup> (b) that they have had to negotiate multiple communicative situations in all their languages, and sometimes more than one in the same conversation.

If we destabilize the dichotomy between monolingual and multilingual, if we destabilize even the distinction between "languages" and see instead a series of choices and negotiations in successive linguistic and rhetorical contexts in which speakers and writers constantly draw on their communicative repertoires to participate effectively in various linguistic interactions, then we will see that choice of a linguistic "code" is not fundamentally different from other choices that speakers routinely make—though it may *seem* more dramatic, especially when seen from the outsider perspective of a "monolingual"—someone who is him- or herself multicompetent within various registers and/or dialects of a single "code." Sometimes the choices are conscious, and the negotiations are explicit, but more often they take place at a subconscious or partially conscious level, or as an instantaneous social adjustment in the fluidity of a real-time interaction.

As Hall, Cheng and Carlson suggest, multicompetence is not defined by differences in language code *per se* but by how speakers/writers deploy whatever linguistic resources they have in order to participate appropriately in shifting moment-by-moment interactions bounded by various discourse communities of practice. All utterances are socially situated, even the "private" discourse of "internal" thought and reflection.

Psycholinguistic research has established that participants in spoken conversations very rapidly synchronize their nonverbal behavior, their words, and even their brains (see Ireland and Pennebaker, 2010, p. 549), and that this search for "common ground"—defined as "matching cognitive frameworks in which conversants adopt shared assumptions, linguistic referents, and knowledge" (p. 550)—goes on both intentionally and unconsciously. Every conversation involves moment-to-moment negotiations and adjustments, as possible misunderstandings are perceived and addressed, as errors and omissions are either ignored or silently mentally corrected, and as the other speaker's perspective is better understood and accounted for: we adjust our speech depending on who we are talking to, their social status (and ours), our respective degrees of knowledge of the subject being discussed, and their relationship to us, and we do so, in most cases, so automatically that we assume different conversational roles and personae, and our language use borrows from various discourses and registers, without the intervention of much conscious thought or effort.<sup>[8]</sup>

Recent research has explored ways in which this matching in oral interaction also carries over into writing. Ireland and Pennebaker have established that "language style matching" occurs in various written contexts, such as correspondence, literary works written by close associates, and, perhaps most relevant for our present discussion, in essays written by college students given prompts which present questions in divergent written styles. Similarly, A. Suresh Canagarajah has recently sought to connect writing to spoken interaction by articulating several principles of multilingual negotiation in conversations:

1. Multilinguals retain their linguistic distinctiveness in social encounters.
2. Multilinguals co-construct intersubjective norms for communication.
3. Multilinguals communicate through hybrid codes.
4. Multilinguals are consensus-oriented and supportive.
5. Multilinguals exploit ecology for meaning making.
6. For multilinguals, language use and language learning are interconnected. (pp. 17-20).

For Canagarajah, focused on an "emic" (participant-centered) view of linguistic interactions, the remarkable aspect of multilingual exchanges is that almost all of them result in successful communication, and that error, properly understood, is almost non-existent. Canagarajah radically "redefine[s] 'error' as those items one or both members of the interaction refuse to negotiate" (p. 18). That is, error is not deviation from some norm of correctness; rather, error is a behavior that happens when the participants give up on communicating with each other—which hardly ever happens. Error occurs when the transaction they were attempting between them turns out not to be important enough to continue negotiating a basis for communication. Error is a situation—quite an anomalous one—in which communication is not completed.

From what Canagarajah calls a "plurilinguistic" perspective, at the root of linguistic activity is a desire to communicate in a certain concrete social context. The speaker/writer seeks to interact as a member—even a transient, member—of a particular community of practice which may be at once intensely local, and yet participate at the same time in a larger discourse that transcends the particularities of the particular individuals having a conversation.

Canagarajah's model of plurilinguistic competence leads him to explore the practice of what he calls "code-meshing," of mixing and matching various levels of languages, dialects, and registers in a single piece of writing. In some ways this parallels the common practice among speakers who are bilingual in the same languages of moving back and forth between them during the same conversation or sometimes even the same sentence, a practice facilitated by face-to-face interaction which permits constant monitoring of comprehension by the other participant. In code-meshing in essays or other printed texts, the principal difference is that in writing one has to continuously create and re-create,

from moment to moment, the imagined reader who will understand these multiple levels of discourse.

If we do not essentialize either the "monolingual" or the "multilingual" speaker, then how are we to think about language difference? One idea recently suggested, and endorsed by a number of language scholars, is what its authors termed a "translingual" approach (Horner et. al., 2011). The suggestion is that writers have the right to expect an engaged and tolerant reader who is prepared to make moment-to-moment linguistic adjustments in the course of understanding a text:

[T]ranslingualism teaches language users to assume and expect that each new instance of language use brings the need and opportunity to develop new ways of using language, and to draw on a range of language resources. The ability to negotiate differences and to improvise ways to produce meaning across language differences with whatever language resources are available is becoming increasingly necessary, not only to careers and commerce, but to the chances for peace and justice (pp.308-309).

This approach to language, which challenges some basic beliefs about language and the teaching of writing in a WAC/WID context, also contests traditional theory and practice of the second language acquisition field, where research has tended to focus on how particular language learners progress. Dwight Atkinson advocates a "sociocognitive" approach to language which he contrasts with a traditional view of learning a language as primarily internal, individual, and cognitive process. Atkinson's view is that language is fundamentally a social practice, and that acquiring it requires the learner to be embedded within a functioning social system, in a supported and scaffolded way.<sup>9</sup> From this emerging perspective, language is what language users *do* with it, individually and in particular groups (such as, for example, academic disciplines), and does not exist apart from that negotiated use.

## Some Final Thoughts

Multicompetence, multiliteracies, plurilinguistic competence, translingualism, a sociocognitive synthesis, L1/L2 "heritage" users: what all these approaches have in common is an intense focus on the localized, situated use of language in a particular linguistic context. Language is conceived as fundamentally social and essentially communicative and interactive; it does not so much represent the world as it transacts relationships, implements personal and group agendas, and, as an embodied and material entity, initiates synchronized biological reactions and adjustments in speakers and listeners, readers and writers. All of these developments share a commitment to a redefinition of the boundaries between the individual language user and the social context in which all her language actions occur.

In order to visualize what a recalibrated approach to advanced academic literacy might look like, we need at this point to disengage WAC from WID, and general education from specialized education in the major, as the answers are somewhat different, and even contradictory. Here we will follow Jonathan Monroe's distinctions: "WAC emphasizes the commonality, portability, and communicability of writing practices, [while] WID emphasizes disciplinary differences, diversity, and heterogeneity" (p. 2). In terms of curriculum design in most U.S. higher education systems, WAC then would be associated most strongly with the general education mission. This component compels all students to become, on at least an elementary level, multi-register users in a contact zone. The students themselves become the location within which various registers compete and interact. The very scheduling of courses—consecutive blocks of different subjects—forces students to make rapid transitions from register to register, from culture to culture. Clearly it is a conscious goal of the U.S.



education system—unlike some other higher education systems where students take courses only within their chosen field of study—to promote a multi-register crossover. The system puts a premium on adaptation and on swiftly moving between registers. The goal of creating an "educated person" involves a student who can move nimbly in and out of various academic cultures, disciplines, discourses, genres, and communities of practice.

The goal of general education, and thus of WAC (as opposed to WID), is not so much disciplinarity as interdisciplinarity, with learning objectives for all students including an emphasis on breadth, adaptability, negotiation, increasing one's communicative repertoire, shuttling between languages, dialects, registers, and discourses. Writing in any particular situation is just an example, inviting students to apply and to develop their skills of negotiating multiple audiences, genres, rhetorical approaches, and/or registers.

If WAC/WID is to be seen as having an ongoing basic research mission—as opposed to a faculty development role restricted to passing on to succeeding generations of instructors a fairly solid but essentially static collection of pedagogical lore—then what is the primary subject matter for that research? Our answer is that we need to conceptualize, investigate empirically, and explain theoretically the stages through which students—individually or as a group—navigate the complex territories of discipline-specific writing during their academic careers and beyond. In this essay we have barely scraped the surface of the potential ways in which our WAC/WID research can be energized by engaging with ongoing work in second language acquisition, second language writing, applied linguistics, and other relevant fields. It is not only that we need to respond to the urgent needs of multilingual, multicompetent students in the courses which we teach and oversee, as vital as that is. Rather, the alternate theoretical frameworks from other disciplines offer us new filters through which we can see our own territory with fresh eyes, and begin to re-imagine it. Our colleagues in these adjacent disciplines conceive of writing in ways different from those in which WAC/WID or composition studies traditionally have. They conceive of learning in different ways, and their classroom practices, together with their theoretical bases, offer possible avenues of experimentation to improve both pedagogy and research. By entering actively into such multi-dimensional dialogues, WAC/WID will both benefit from the insights of others and at the same time make its own unique contributions to the ongoing interdisciplinary conversation which in coming years will re-define the way we—writers, students, instructors, researchers around the world—think about literacy, learning, teaching, and the meaning of a university education.

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## Notes

[1] In this we will be mainly focused on a U.S. undergraduate model, which typically involves brief, often one-semester visits to various academic communities of practice in order to satisfy "general education" or "distribution" requirements, along with a more sustained immersion in a chosen "major" disciplinary community. The former we will associate with WAC, the latter with WID.

[2] Kern (2003, p. 10). For more on advanced foreign language learning and its relation to literacy, see Maxim and Byrnes (2003), especially the articles by Kern and by Byrnes and Sprang.

[3] Hall, Cheng, and Carlson here draw on and develop Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of "communities of practice."

[4] See Atkinson (1998) pp. 9-11 for a discussion of the relation between register and genre; he argues that "genre represents the complex, conventionalized *rhetorical* form and content of whole texts, register primarily represents the patterns of co-occurring *linguistic* structures that comprise such texts."

[5] See Hall (2009) for a discussion of the conditions in which WAC/WID increasingly must contend: the New Latin, the New Student, and the New Linguistic Majority.

[6] "...[Suresh] Canagarajah, ..after noting that all languages are comprised of multiple, and often conflicting, dialects, ...exclaimed that 'Maybe we're all multilinguals!'" (Vance 2009, p. 281)

[7] In some cases this might be through simultaneous bilingualism in childhood, but the usual case is that it's at least somewhat sequential and required some effort on the part of the speaker, and in any case they have experience in shuttling between languages.

[8] For an account of this psycholinguistic research background, see the opening pages of Ireland and Pennebaker (2010): "Evidence suggests that individuals are able to adapt seamlessly to another's language use very early in conversations and make rapid adjustments in response to set-backs, such as misunderstandings and speech errors, as conversations progress. People tend to carry out these adjustments with very little effort, often managing to accommodate another person's perspective using cognitively cheap one-bit" adjustments (e.g., recognizing that the person they are talking to is an undergraduate or a nonnative speaker) (Brennan & Hanna, 2009)" (p. 550).

[9] Atkinson (2002, p. 528) here draws upon the work of Gee (1994).

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