

CHAPTER 10

ENGLISH IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT: PRIVILEGED SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THE FOR-PROFIT ESOL CLASSROOM

Marino Fernandes

University of New Hampshire

This chapter argues that students of the global elite who attend for-profit language schools may have power, but they do not have access to classroom writing experiences that lead them to develop a feeling of agency and control over language. Curricula at for-profit language schools are focused on imparting academic language skills with an eye to improving things like SAT and TOEFL scores. In contrast, second language learners in college writing classrooms are asked to position themselves in relation to the world they are writing in and out of, thus experiencing a classroom that admits of real consequences. At the same time that this kind of classroom experience creates vulnerability, it also helps to generate agency. I suggest that a redesigned curriculum may be one way to help students understand that agency is a crucial element of power.

On February 11, 1994, my brother and sisters and I arrived in this country for the first time. My mother and father, already in the US, met us at John F. Kennedy International Airport. I was fourteen years old. My parents asked me, the best English speaker in the family, to find out where we might find a taxi or a shuttle to drive us to Boston, but every time I opened my mouth to say “Where can I find a taxi?” I got the stock response: “I can’t hear you.” I asked louder, but, still, they couldn’t hear me. When I told my parents that no one could hear me they asked me if I was sure I was saying it right. This was my first of many experiences with the disconnect between learning a language in the safe confines of a classroom and using a language to communicate in the world.

I have spent over two thirds of my life learning a new language. Born in Portugal, I moved to my father's home country of Cape Verde as a boy, where I needed to quickly learn Kriolu. Then, at fourteen, my family moved to the United States where I learned English. I was the oldest of four children, and, as often happens, I quickly became the translator of language and culture and custom to my entire family.

There is little doubt that these experiences have led me to develop a great interest in the study of languages and the complexity of learning them; further, they have greatly affected how I approach the teaching of English in the ESOL classroom. Having come to teach ESOL as a second-language learner myself, my charge in my classroom was colored by the idea that English was something that unlocked doors for me and my family, and I was finally going to be able to pass that on to my students. As I began to focus more on the teaching of writing at my school—a for-profit school that contracts out space from a major university in the Northeast but is not connected to or governed by the university—I began to notice that my own experiences learning English were quite different from the population I was working with: economically elite, second- or other-language learners from all over the world for whom learning English seems to be more of a trophy than an act of survival as it was for me.

Teaching these “trophy” students is most often happening in a for-profit setting. The traditional writing curricula used in this setting, I will argue, does not and cannot support a richer context for learning English because, instead of engaging students in their learning and writing in English, it engenders a spectator attitude. This chapter—based on a “Scholars of the Dream” presentation I gave at the 2012 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication—examines the “global elite” language learner and looks into the curricula at a private, for-profit ESOL school. I argue for a curriculum infused with elements that draw from the process approaches English L1 (first language) composition classroom, despite the critique of such classrooms by Horowitz (1990), Matsuda (1997) and Silva (1993) as effective learning experiences for the English L2 (second language) learner.

FOR-PROFIT LANGUAGE SCHOOLS AND THE PRIVILEGED L2 LEARNER

Many composition classrooms ask that students position themselves in relation to the world they are writing in and out of. The fact that they are asked to define and position themselves in a way that admits of real consequences creates vulnerability, but also can generate a feeling of agency and control over

language. Second language learners in these settings also have access to this kind of writing experience. Language learning in this setting is, therefore, high stakes; not having dominion over a language denies second language learners (as it denies *any* student) very real and tangible opportunities and experiences.

On the other hand, curricula at for-profit language schools are focused on imparting academic language skills with an eye to improving things like SAT and TOEFL scores. The writing curriculum for students in these programs has correctness and standard formulaic production of writing as its goals. And most students attending these programs desire little else by way of writing instruction, as I have seen and as Vandrick (2010) describes in her essay “Social Class Privilege among ESOL Writing Student,” in which she looks at the way membership in a privileged social class shapes the identity of some second language learners, those that she calls “students of the new global elite.” She examines the ways that these students behave differently than other second language learners and how that behavior affects, in turn, the behavior of instructors who teach them. For-profit language schools are almost exclusively attended by the students Vandrick describes. While the global elite students enrolled in these programs report that English writing proficiency gives them access to better jobs, academic opportunities, increased (geographical) mobility, these same students have also remarked to me that failing to achieve proficiency is not dangerous in any way because they have their own lives back in their respective countries. The cloak of privilege that Vandrick talks about is clear in how these students see the role of ESOL writing in their lives. During a class discussion in an advanced integrated skills class at my for-profit school, for example, one student said, “It is good for me if I can write well, but I can live in my country without it.”

To better understand the subset of students I am talking about, I will tell you a little about the school’s curriculum. It is important to note here that, though this curriculum is not the same for every for-profit school out there, it is true of my institution that operates at an international level and occupies a significant portion of the market worldwide. The classes at the particular for-profit school where I teach ran in cycles of ten weeks per proficiency level with students coming in and out after passing a multiple choice level test. Any particular class could have a student in her tenth week with that teacher and three students in their second and third weeks. Following the curriculum, these classes tended to shape in one-week arcs at best. Though it is prescribed in the curriculum, students don’t have to stay for ten weeks, but they do have to get A’s for eight weeks straight in order to be allowed to take the level test early. Once students find out about this option almost everyone asks to take the level test early. Students often say that they need their certificate of graduation to indicate that they passed the highest level possible. An A in the class means scoring a

90% on a 30-question grammar test, a 30-question listening and speaking test, and a 30-question reading and writing test which asks general comprehension questions that make use of the grammar points and vocabulary of the week. There is no weekly writing assignment given at this particular school. Most important is that teachers keep strict records of student attendance to make sure they are in compliance with federal visa regulations.

Classes meet for three hours a day, five days a week for ten weeks per level. Each day the instructor is expected to cover four areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many teachers' manuals that we used at the school suggested that the students spend a few minutes discussing something related to a topic, read the text in class, and, finally, answer 10 or 15 comprehension questions, either alone or in groups. Students also work out of skills books that introduces them to one grammatical principle for the week and one aspect of writing that will ultimately contribute to the formation of a five-paragraph essay.

The students at my school tended to manipulate the structure of the curriculum in a way that fit their goals. Some students raced through the curriculum in order to attend classes at one of the area universities or to be able to return home and report that they had reached a certain level. Other students, on a kind of language-learning holiday, prolonged their stay in a particular level if they liked the teacher or their classmates. One student from France whose parents had sent him to the program as a finishing touch before going into the family business stayed in my class for 28 weeks. This student had no reason to speed through the curriculum—or even to finish it. Simply *attending* fulfilled his and his family's expectations. Despite my respect and good feelings for this student, this, in my mind, struck me as an instance of low-risk spectating, even though nothing in his performance was in conflict with the existing curriculum, which largely follows what many TESOL scholars suggest *should* happen in the ESOL classroom.

In *Critical Academic Writing*, TESOL scholar Canagarajah (2002) helps us understand the disparity between the ESOL writing instruction and instructors and L1 Composition while seemingly critiquing both:

It is true that ESOL writing teachers sometimes conceive of their task as a pragmatic one of teaching value-free grammatical features or form-related aspects of essays to their students. Rhetorical and ideological issues are considered irrelevant to the students' practical needs of learning another language for utilitarian purposes in educational and professional life. While L1 [English as first language] Comp

teachers have found it fashionable to indulge in theoretically and politically sophisticated discourse on writing, ESOL teachers have confined themselves to clinically circumscribed classroom-based empirical research on their students' linguistic and cognitive development. (p. 25)

While Canagarajah is talking here about the state of the TESOL discipline, the same tendencies are reflected in implementation at the classroom level. The ESOL students' in-class time is managed toward the "practical needs of learning another language," whereas in L1 composition classrooms students more often engage in discussions around higher order concerns in the text or about the text.

Despite the limitations of TESOL goals for L2 learners in a writing classroom, composition studies does not immediately suggest a clear alternative. I am not unaware that there are critics of English L1 composition classrooms for L2 learners. Tony Silva (1993) cautions us that L1 and L2 writing and writers are very different from one another and that L2 writers would be at a disadvantage if one treated their writing process as one would L1. Silva's findings show that while L1 and L2 writers had basically the same composing process, the L2 writing was more constrained, less fluent and less effective. He goes on to say that L2 writers planned less, had more trouble setting goals and organizing materials, and reviewed, reread, and reflected on their work less than their L1 counterparts. Thus, Silva and other scholars caution against assuming the value of L1 composition instruction for the L2 learner.

OFFERING A DEEPER LEARNING AND WRITING EXPERIENCE

But the problem of the for-profit classroom remains and requires new thinking about TESOL instructional goals and those of the L1 composition classroom when it comes to international students. In her argument, Vandrlick (2010) notes the dearth of research on the role of social class in second language learning and, in particular, the role of privileged social class. This absence of research is only compounded for the for-profit classroom—the site (sometimes the *only* site) where many of these students experience the second language writing classroom.

Students of the global elite often have economic power but no rhetorical agency; a redesigned curriculum is one way they may find their way to that agency. I want to argue that the unique limbo created by privilege that elite second language writers find themselves in would benefit from an infusion of

process elements most often valued in L1 composition classrooms. Contrastive rhetoric scholars like Kaplan (1966) made us aware of a variety of rhetorical organizations different writing cultures use. Since many L2 writers are writing from different cultural and rhetorical understandings, it stands to reason that, without some instruction and time for practice, they wouldn't be able to write using the rhetorical conventions that are expected in the American composition classroom. Students are often surprised that writing done in some US classrooms places the responsibility on the writer, and not so heavily on the reader. "You mean you want us to write so that the reader doesn't have to do any work?" one student asked in my composition course.

A redesigned curriculum would pay attention to the nuances of contrastive rhetoric and value different processes and rhetorical approaches so that students can be aware of these differences and, at the same time, understand what processes and rhetorical styles are valued by US readers. A redesigned curriculum would put this kind of work at the forefront of the students' experience. To address the pragmatic concerns that Horowitz (1990) and Silva (1993) have for these students, I argue that assignments that engage in rhetorical analysis of US forms of argumentation, for example, in comparison to their own writing culture's forms of argumentation are vital, and not simply to help them do well in an American composition classroom. Rather, it is important for instructors who teach these students to understand that this kind of assignment is not simply academic: it asks students to be more thoughtful about their own lives and decisions. An awareness of rhetorical differences, including the shapes of written arguments, is right next door to an awareness of those same kinds of differences outside of the classroom.

If these students do choose to stay for college in the US, the for-profit ESOL classroom can prepare ESOL students by exposing them to American styles of argumentation, but, if they don't, and they typically won't (although this is changing very quickly), what the composition classroom has to offer to students who are not going to stay here are opportunities to make critical arguments, to engage in critical reading in English, which is often presented in a structure that they are not familiar with, and to engage in an analysis of self (for example, in the personal essay) in relation to these arguments.

Students also need to be given time to engage substantially in their reading by talking and writing about the texts. Some teachers' manuals in for-profit ESOL schools often suggest that students take 45 minutes to read a text in class and then answer a set of 10 or 15 comprehension questions about the reading. An activity like this can take the better part of an hour in a class of beginning-advanced or advanced students. That hour is then *not* spent talking about choices the writer made and the reasons he or she made them, nor does it

allow for time to talk about the *issues* addressed in the text. If you are spending a full hour on reading in a class, you aren't spending that time in the writing and thinking and discussion exercises that will allow students to make use of the language they are there to learn in the first place; that is, language and writing that enables them to communicate important ideas that matter to an audience.

In the hope for more substantial engagement with reading, I borrowed from the first year composition classroom. I copied readings and gave students questions to answer as they read the text at home. Students came to class with short written "reader's notes" that we could use as a basis for our in-class conversation. This isn't some crazy, new-fangled assignment, I know, but it is a vastly different assignment than is typically required in my for-profit school. In addition to not having to spend that class time reading, the students had prolonged exposure to the text, which then made it possible for us to have in-class discussions and analyses of the higher-order aspects of the texts as they intersected with their lives. Though most students complained about this work at the beginning of their time in my classroom, many came to actually appreciate the experience. One student in my advanced integrated skills class told me at the end of her time there that she felt that the writing allowed her to "really talk about something that was happening in my life or in the community at that time," and she felt like her ideas and her thinking mattered because they were out there—being talked about in class, validated or disagreed with. In this and the other assignments I'll describe next, ideas were being made real in (our piece of) the world through the students' use of written language. Many students said that this was a way they could really use the language they were learning to talk about real things, not the kinds of broad, empty topics the textbooks we were using had them read about: internet and cell phone addiction or "the media."

Another notable difference between the kind of reading and writing the textbooks typically asked for and the reading and writing I asked students to do in my classes was that I asked, really required, students to engage with the argument and ideas of a reading *personally*. I wanted to know what they thought and what experiences in their lives influenced how they read and understood the text. One assignment asked that students write about a feature of their home culture that they thought would not survive if they were to move to the US permanently, and examine *why* that feature would not survive. This prompt also asked them to use their native status in their culture to examine what about that feature was particularly symbolic of their culture. To provide a fuller response, students had to answer questions such as *What is particularly Korean [for example] about this behavior?*, *What are the cultural values reflected in and through this behavior?*, and *Why would these behaviors/attitudes/values not survive in American society?*

This was a very difficult assignment in the beginning for the students because what they had been taught to write were “compare and contrast” essays, which meant that their essays were little more than lists of behaviors people have in each country. “In my country, we kiss cheeks and here people shake hands” and so on. Working in the process model allowed us to refine and give weight to the theses of their papers. Students had to spend some time thinking about how their home countries had shaped them and, by putting their culture in conflict with American culture, many of them came to identify some causes of confusion or culture shock. Their writing moved beyond just a list of characteristics, and, instead, attempted to get at what it meant to them to be Korean or Saudi or Chinese. For many, this was a positive experience that validated their sense of their own national identity; for others, it was a moment for them to seriously consider what it meant to be a representative of their culture living in the US (even if for only a short time).

Another assignment I gave required students to research the platforms of the possible candidates for the 2012 US presidential election with respect to their own countries’ interests and to persuade voters to vote for one candidate over all of the others. After many trips to the library, one student became visibly angry with all of the possible candidates: “As a Chinese, this was difficult for me to write, because no one had any good words for us.” The title of her essay ended up being “Of the Two Evils, Choose the Lesser.” This student was pointing at the fact that none of the platforms she had examined depicted China in a very positive light. Suddenly, in this moment, the rosy lens with which she saw her experience in the US disappeared because of her new understanding of how she must have been viewed as a Chinese National by the US citizens and students around her. (For more examples of writing assignments that ask L2 students to think and write critically about international issues, see Siczek & Shapiro’s [this volume] description of a course model focused on world Englishes.)

A for-profit ESOL writing class would benefit from exercises in topic generation, brainstorming, organization of ideas, prioritization, revisions (all things Silva’s study suggests these students could use some work on), along with discussions of the rhetorical patterns each of the students adopts in his or her writing and assignments calling for a personal investment in learning to write in English. (Hirsch’s [this volume] analysis of effective writing curricula for L2 students also finds that this type of scaffolding leads to L2 student success). These process-focused activities are beginning to show up in some for-profit curricula, but, as Terry Santos (1992) points out, just because they show up there doesn’t mean that these activities actually make their way into the classroom. One major reason for this is that instructors at for-profit schools

aren't paid for the many hours it takes to read essays. Many of my colleagues also admitted that they didn't feel confident in their training to teach writing with a focus on the process approach.

The American composition classroom has been understood for over thirty years as a place where process and product are emphasized, but that is not the case in the for-profit second language classroom. Though a call for process in the for-profit classroom might seem less than revolutionary, the results of such an infusion could be. I am calling for genuine engagement in the experience of process. This is not a complete revamping of the for-profit ESOL curriculum but a suggestion that the for-profit ESOL classroom would benefit from an infusion of pedagogical tools from the composition classroom. The strategies and kinds of assignments I mention above are not original or particularly innovative. Of greater importance here is that these strategies and assignments ask students to engage in the process of writing, reading, and thinking rather than simply produce brief, uniform products and short essay responses.

ENGAGED WRITING FOR AGENCY

Writing, when there is not much at stake, becomes an exercise in low-risk spectating—just another ride the student can take while on his/her language journey. Social privilege along with the current curriculum design at for-profit schools affords students who are able to take a year leave to perfect their English a certain distance between themselves and the material they are being asked to engage with at a personal level. They are spectators and not participants. The kinds of writing and methods of teaching writing I describe here demand an active engagement that requires visiting and revisiting the ideas and the writer's relationship to them.

Considering the assignments that I've described, it can't come as any surprise when I say that another thing that the for-profit ESOL classroom could take from the field of rhetoric and composition is a good dose of critical pedagogy. Vandrlick (1995) made this same recommendation in an early article on this ESOL elite population, "Privileged ESL University Students." Critical pedagogy is inspired by the teaching and scholarship of Paulo Freire and asks teachers and students alike to consider their relationship to power in and out of the classroom. Critical pedagogy is often understood as a way to empower the otherwise disenfranchised. ESOL students, especially those we see in public schools, are often members of those disenfranchised groups that critical pedagogy aims to empower and usually the group of students we most often identify with the label "ESL."

But I would suggest that it is equally important to engage students on the other end of the power divide in critical pedagogy classrooms. David Nuremberg (2011) discusses Freire's (1974) influence in his own teaching at a "high-powered, affluent, suburban public high school." Referencing Freire, Nuremberg argues that

it is impossible to humanly exist without assuming the right and the duty to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political and therefore the teacher has some responsibility and duty to help students become aware of and empowered by their own ability to make these choices. Teaching inevitably involves calling students' attention to social issues as matters of ethical choice and not merely as the result of societal determinism. Therefore, Freire says, teachers should work to help students make concrete connections between what they have read and what is happening in the world, country, or the local community. (p. 34)

Despite the fact that for some of my students' power can sometimes feel "socially determined," they cannot be said to have agency if their actions are not accompanied by reflection and a more complete articulation of their reasons for acting. What has become clear to me is that while these students have power, they do not necessarily have agency because they don't know in what ways they are powerful. They don't know that the consequence of being a member of this global elite is that they could come to make decisions that could affect large numbers of individuals in the world.

Having power but no agency is just as crippling as having no power at all. Even those who are socially and economically privileged can't go through doors they don't know exist. These students still need for someone to show them how to pass through those doors. Given the potential power that the students at these schools are likely to inherit or come to exert in the world, more attention should be given to how private for-profit ESOL curricula are designed and taught.

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