

**brief excerpts from Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages?**

**Complicating the Yes/No Debate** From *Composition Studies*, spring 2003

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To become accomplished writers in standardized English, must students work within at least an approximation of that variety of English throughout their composing process? Can we validate language minority students' languages and identities at the same time we help them learn the dominant variety of English? Are there contexts and circumstances under which we might encourage our students to draw on a home language or mother tongue as they generate ideas and compose early drafts? Here are some important variables or criteria that bear on the question of whether or not to invite students to write in a home dialect or language.

(1) First variable. Is it a home *language* or in a home *dialect*? We often stress the obvious or common sense view that it makes more sense to invite writing in a dialect of English than in an entirely different language: . . . Nevertheless, we sometimes question whether it makes sense to distinguish between writing in a home dialect and writing in a home language (or is even possible): . . .

(2) Second variable. What kind of writing is the goal? Certain kinds of writing lend themselves more readily than others to the use of a home language or dialect. For example, many teachers ask for exploratory writing that's not to be developed any further because the goal is simply to help students think about a reading or prepare for a discussion. Sometimes this writing is not intended for the eyes of others—or even discarded. The goal of such writing is not to create a product but rather to help students think something through or explore their reactions. And mother tongue writing also makes more obvious sense for pieces meant to convey personal experience such as personal essays, memoir, fiction, and poetry. . . .

But writing in a home language or dialect makes little sense when students have no chance to revise and the piece must be in standardized English. This is common in exam situations. Also, there are many situations that call for simple informal writing that is not worth taking the trouble to revise, . . .

(3) Who is the audience? Many teachers have found it appropriate to invite students occasionally to work on pieces of writing in a home language for readers who are speakers of that language: perhaps family members, friends, or even a local employer.

(4) What is the political or psychological context for an invitation to write in a home language—particularly with regard to stigmatization and identity? It can never be easy to decide whether to invite students to write in their home language. But if that home language is not stigmatized—as is usually the case for, say, Russian-, Cambodian-, or Japanese-speaking students in an English classroom (inside or outside the U.S.)—that decision, however uncertain, can be made on comparatively straightforward pragmatic linguistic and pedagogical grounds. If, in contrast, the home language is highly stigmatized, then the context becomes incredibly vexed and dangerous, and a teacher's decision can only be made with enormous uncertainty and humility.

(6) How much trust is there between students and teacher? Often, students can more easily trust a teacher who is a native speaker of the dialect or language in question—or a teacher who shares their race, ethnicity, and class.

(7) Is the home dialect or language commonly used for writing—with a settled orthography? Can the teacher provide readings in the home language? Are the students comfortable reading and writing in their home dialect or language? The more these questions can be answered “Yes,” the easier it is likely to be for students to write in their home dialect or language. . . . Yet even if students have written rather little in *any* language—as is the case with some ESL students even in college classrooms—a case can be made for inviting some writing in that home language or dialect. For when such students try to write in standardized English, they face a double hurdle: an unfamiliar language and an unfamiliar medium. We noted from some of our

own informal experiments in teaching that students *can* get comfortable writing in a language “by ear”—even when they are not literate in it or there is no official orthography. Indeed, an official orthography sometimes makes writers worry about spelling.

(8) [*I include this section in full.*] What is the process by which students move from exploratory writing or early drafts in a home dialect or language to revised and final versions in standardized English: *word-for-word translating* or *more global rewriting/revising*? This question is particularly important for students writing in a completely different language from English. The process of direct translation causes obvious problems that have often been noted:

First, [translating] does not solve the problem that students are not able to fully and fluently express their ideas in English, a task they will be asked to perform throughout their school years. Second, having students use one language to negotiate the other can limit their opportunities of learning to express their ideas in English, reduce authentic reasons for using English, and diminish their felt need to learn to express their ideas in English. (Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins 43)

The extensive use of translation may hinder second-language writing fluency and delay the development of an awareness of the expectations of a second-language audience. (Kobayashi and Rinnert 205). Also, of course, word-for-word translating often leads to words and syntax that are inappropriate or wrong for L2.

But students can get the benefits of writing in a home language and still avoid the problems of direct translation. Peter Elbow worked with a woman who spoke Puerto Rican-based Spanish. She was not highly literate in her mother tongue, but she found it a great relief to write in it and found she could write many more thoughts and much more quickly. When she translated directly from her Spanish, she ran into the obvious problems of false cognates and inappropriate syntax for English. But when she put her Spanish text completely aside (after looking it over) and set herself the task of revising or rewriting—*composing explicitly in English* on the basis of it—she was able to call on the richer thinking and subtler distinctions she had produced thanks to her home language. In this revising task, she was working in standardized English—trying to use its lexicon and syntax. Of course she experienced the frustration of having more complex and subtle meanings in mind that were difficult for her to render in English. But at least she *had* that rich content driving her, and so she had a good incentive to stretch her use of English.

If this rewriting/revising approach proves beneficial in further research and classroom trials, it will yield a point of strategic leverage: when students compose in a language other than English and then rewrite/revise wholly in English—not seeing the lexicon and syntax of their home language and not trying to stay tied to it—they will get a double benefit: the benefit of composing or inventing in their home language, but also the benefit of *composing again in English* and thus practicing and developing a kind of syntactic fluency in the target language. This approach thus cuts through the over-simple either/or choice about whether to compose in standardized English or some other language: students can practice composing in both languages. Every time they go through this process, it will be a good occasion for reflecting on the contrasting resources of each language and the discourse or culture it tends to carry.

(9) Who chooses whether students write in a language different from standardized English—the student or the teacher (or the institution)? We suspect most readers would agree that students should not be forced or even pressured into this option. . . . But if choice is important, then we note this: in most classrooms, *students now have no choice*. That is, in most classrooms where the dominant variety of English is the norm, students feel it is wrong to write in a different dialect or language.

(10) A final variable—one that usually plays the biggest role in classrooms: the teacher’s own beliefs or convictions—especially about nondominant varieties of English. We take linguistic richness and bilingualism as values in themselves. We sense the danger that standardized English will drive out other varieties of English—as it is putting pressure on other languages around the globe. We believe that more work is needed in order to invite language minority students into higher education, and that towards this end it is important to honor the legitimacy and linguistic sophistication of all languages and dialects. Thus we affirm the 4Cs statement on “Students’ Rights to their Own Language” and the Linguistic Society of America “Statement on Language Rights.”