Literacy Autobiographies in a University ESL Class

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There is genius in every language. (Thiong’o, 2004, p. 106)

Concerns of teachers should be the individuals who come to the learning sites with specific histories, personalities and agencies. It is our task to discover these through interactions with learners. (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 157)

Abstract: I define the literacy autobiography as a reflective, first-person account of one’s development as a writing being. In this article I share a classroom practice that invited language learners to consider and compose their literacy autobiographies (LA). The context was a university credit English as a second language (ESL) classroom. The purposes of the LA were to enact many of the principles and concepts considered beneficial to second language writing, particularly the bringing of the first language (L1) into the second language (L2) classroom, and to engage with students in constructivist learning. I describe why and how I envisioned this small LA project; how we (the students and I) enacted the project; the theoretical frameworks supporting LA; how the project developed into a contrastive analysis assignment; and, finally, why I must revision the project. In my view, contrastive rhetoric, contrastive analysis, communities of practice, multiliteracies, and sociocultural theory all provide support for using LA in the classroom.

Keywords: Literacy autobiography; academic writing; contrastive rhetoric; identity; pedagogy

Résumé : L’auteure définit l’autobiographie de la littératie comme une réflexion rédigée au « je » sur le développement d’une personne en tant qu’être qui écrit. Elle parle d’un exercice qui invite les apprenants à rédiger leur autobiographie de la littératie (AL), dans le cadre d’un cours universitaire d’anglais langue seconde donnant droit à des crédits. Les AL avaient pour but de mettre en pratique de nombreux principes et concepts censés être avantageux en rédaction d’une langue seconde, comme l’apport de la langue maternelle (L1) dans la classe de langue seconde (L2). De plus, les AL devaient permettre aux étudiants d’adopter une méthode constructiviste d’apprentissage. Dans l’article, on décrit les raisons sous-jacentes à la création...
My script in coming to this project

I have been working in the presence of multiliterate individuals for decades as an ESL teacher, but it was only fairly recently that I became interested in literacy autobiography (LA) as a curriculum component. At the time, I was studying cross-cultural autobiographies (Steinman, 2004). These first-person accounts, these data, describe the powerful effects that our language histories generally and our writing histories in particular have on our present actions. I have since been reading, thinking, and talking a great deal about contrastive rhetoric, which is the study of writing conventions and writing values and how these may vary across cultures. I discovered the important implications of these writing conventions – textual, contextual, cognitive, affective, and political. I began to reconsider what I had been expecting second language (L2) writers in my classes to produce, or, rather, to reproduce, and what I had been expecting them to suppress – the powerful resource that is their L1 writing abilities (Steinman, 2003).

Intention into practice, indirectly

I started to incorporate what I was learning about L1 writing (W1) into my work, which was, at the time, teacher education. I emphasized to potential language teachers the relevance of learner backgrounds and stories and the importance of including L1 and W1 in the L2 classroom. In the summer of 2005, I gave graduate students in education the assignment of interviewing an L2 writer about what it felt like to write in a second language. The interviewees had never been asked, nor had they ever reflected on the story of how they came to L2 writing – they were too busy learning how to do so and then just doing it. The findings were rich. These interviews turned into
lengthy and moving conversations. In some cases, the interviewees warned the graduate student researchers that the interviews would be very short because there was nothing to say, but once they began to talk about their writing histories there was a great deal to say. This supports the Vygotskian notion that language develops thought. I became more certain that LA could serve as a powerful learning resource for both multilingual students and their teachers. In the two contexts mentioned above, however, I was working only indirectly with LA – that is, advising others to bring W1 into the classroom.

**Intention into practice, directly**

Along came a new job, and, with it, an opportunity. I became responsible for two sections of credit ESL involving 50 undergraduate students across disciplines. The expected emphasis on instruction in academic writing presented, I hoped, an affordance for me, for the students, and for the LA initiative. Challenge! Would I be able to enact my beliefs in the importance of W1 while helping individuals to develop L2 writing (W2) expertise? Could I incorporate direct attention to W1 into the curriculum in an integrated way, rather than as an add-on? *That is, I could talk it, but could I walk it?* I became determined to move from intention to practice.

Literacy autobiographies – which honour the prior knowledge so important in pedagogy – would be my starting point. The students, I hoped, would engage in a form of reflexive ethnography, considering the literacy community from which they came and describing their positions in a *new* and – in some ways, but not in all ways – *different* literacy community. My goals were threefold:

1. Research indicates that writers bring skills and beliefs from their L1 writing to L2 writing (Connor, 1996; Cumming, 1989; Friedlander, 1990), so accessing information about early literacy experiences would heighten my awareness of what factors might affect, effect, or deflect students’ academic writing in English. This expression would also stimulate into consciousness for the students their writing histories and writing possibilities. A believer in constructivist education, during which knowledge is created by all participants, I wanted to diminish teacher dominance from the outset. The students and I would co-construct knowledge about writing – past, present, and future.
I planned to provide and then engage in the metalanguage that would serve students while they were living a cross-rhetoric experience. I hoped their literacies would interact in a respectful way, prompting what Agar (1994) refers to as ‘rich points,’ and that our classroom would be what Cadman calls ‘a site for transcultural dialogues’ (2006, p. 353). We would be working on an additive level – we would not limit this course to what Granville and Dison refer to as ‘language repair’ (2005, p. 105).

I would help students to acquire the Western/English discourse patterns in a respectful manner, which we would negotiate. We would work within and outside the set curriculum – another negotiation of sorts.

**Rationale**

Why did I choose literacy autobiographies as a vehicle for these goals? The L1, and by extension W1, is a resource – personal linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). While there is some good literature on bringing L1 literacy into the classroom for ESL schoolchildren (Cummins, 2000; Lotherington, 2006), there does not seem to be much advocacy for L1 literacy inclusion in the college or university ESL or English for academic purposes (EAP) classroom:

> While the profession celebrates heteroglossia, and difference, most rhetoric instruction remains monologic and ethnocentric.’ (Lovejoy, 2003, p. 90)

I felt strongly that this moment of contact with me was critical to how these students saw themselves as undergraduates in a Canadian university and as writing individuals. Equally, this moment of contact put me to the test – I had changed my beliefs; now I had to try to align the curriculum and the materials. I was working backwards from Fullan’s (2001) notion of change in education. Fullan describes three levels of change in education – change of material, of practice, and of beliefs – in ascending order of difficulty.

**Theoretical perspectives informing and encouraging me**

LA is not a project or a practice in search of a theory. There are, in my view, numerous theories and concepts respected in the research and literature on SLA that support the inclusion of LA in the ESL classroom. These include contrastive rhetoric, multiliteracies,
communities of practice, and sociocultural theory. I will touch on each. Contrastive rhetoric, writing across cultures, is an interesting branch of language in use, and LA provides an opportunity to explore how writing practices may vary across cultures. Multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) advocates calling on all available designs as a resource in meaning making; I suggest that W1 is one of those available designs. Lave and Wenger’s concept of community of practice (1991) also seems relevant to this project. How, if at all, are bi- and multilingual students from other writing environments initiated or welcomed into the community of practice of academic writers? How much, if at all, are they allowed to contribute and transform? Finally, I am struck by how many concepts embedded in sociocultural theory seem to support (and be supported by) LA. These concepts include the idea that writing helps to develop rather than only express thought and the value of a collaborative learning forum, referred to as “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) by Vygotsky (1986).

Enacted practice – descriptively

I will relate what happened in one class of 24 students in which 10 different L1s were represented: Albanian, Cantonese, Croatian, Farsi, Hebrew, Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu. I anticipated that this might be the first time these students realized that their rhetorical histories, contextualized, could be considered a story or a continuum. As a prompt, I gave as the first course reading something not in the extant kit, a language narrative authored by a multiliterate writer: The Fortunate Traveler: Shuttling between Communities and Literacies by Economy Class (Canagarajah, 2001). This piece represents, in both form and content, Tamil and English writing characteristics, in that the author describes and then creates a hybrid text – a theme that would recur through the course. We reviewed what Canagarajah noted as being of value in English writing and in Tamil writing. The students then added a third column: ‘what is valued in my L1 writing.’ Students wrote a short piece entitled ‘What Is Valued in My L1 Writing.’ This piece of writing was not marked (my mistake, as it turns out); rather, it served, first, as an initial sample of students’ writing and, second, as a frame for what was to become a frequent inclusion of L1 and W1 in the curriculum. I invited the writers to address their L1 only or to contrast and compare it to Tamil and/or to English. I liked this option because it did not take English as the only comparison or reference point.
The students were candid and thoughtful in their analyses of both L1 and L2 – several mentioning the devaluing of feelings and emotion in English writing, and thus aligning their own L1 more with Tamil conventions that with English ones:

I am really shocked that feelings don’t matter so much in English writing.
We have to tell people exactly what we are saying. In my language we have to try to figure it out which is better.
Writing in both my languages is hard because I am not an organized person.

One beginning – non-Western in style – stood out, as it touched me:

If you ask me what is the sweetest language in the world, I will say Farsi.

That one cannot essentialize the writing of a language is clear when speakers of the same language represent writing values differently – particularly spirited discussion ensued among the Korean speakers/writers.

Timelines

After creating a literacy timeline for Canagarajah based on his essay, the students created their own literacy timelines – critical junctures in their becoming literate, and then bi- or multiliterate, up to the present time. During this meta-writing activity, students were asked to reflect on the connectedness of their writing selves.

Each timeline was unique, but there was some evidence of collective experience. Most timelines included at least one incident in which a teacher made a brief but influential comment that affected how the learner felt about his or her writing skills. A variety of early home literacy incidents was described. Many students indicated a pivotal moment when they realized that they would need English for study or for immigration and regretted not paying enough attention to English in class. Current writing requirements for their university courses were mentioned by several of the students, modified with adjectives of concern: ‘worried about,’ ‘not prepared for,’ and the like. I did not grade these timelines, but I did collect them and comment on them. I selected, or asked students to select, one incident which they were then to develop into a four- to five-page critical incident paper.
It was a new experience for students to be asked to consider L1 writing values and to consider their literacy histories in an integrated way – as stories, with characters and contexts and plot. I was relaxed about the hand-in date. At about this time, the first graded assignment had to be handed in, the oral presentation had to be prepared, and the required readings from the course kit were pressing on us. Ten students handed in the critical incident paper. I read them and commented – they were extremely well done. I did not require the others to hand in their critical incidents.

**Dilemma and redesign**

Here is where the project swerved to some degree and I needed to reroute it. I had not intended to mark the students’ LAs, but I realized that they – that we – had very little time in which to engage in ungraded writing. I had already set the marking scheme and was unwilling to alter it, as this unsettles students. My dilemma was what to do when it became clear that I had not carved the space for LA thoughtfully enough.

However, there was still an oral presentation component required for the second term. I had not yet determined or announced the topic, which was left to the discretion of each course instructor. I considered moving the critical incidents into the oral presentation slot, but I had misgivings. I had hoped to have some of the students working in pairs; not all students would be comfortable talking about their personal histories; finally, and compellingly, there had to be a traditional research component to the presentation. However, it was important to me to maintain the momentum we had created during the investigation and what I could characterize as a celebration of first languages and dual/multiple literacies. Instead of continuing with individual stories of literacy, I designed the oral presentation as a contrastive analysis (CA). Students were asked to create a presentation in which they would present at least two of five dimensions along which their L1 varied from English: pragmatics (appropriateness); lexis (vocabulary); phonology (pronunciation); syntax (grammar); and orthography (writing systems). Students who shared an L1 with someone else in the class had the option of working with that person on a paired presentation. These were the most thoughtful oral presentations in all my teaching experience. The students, not I, truly were the knowers.
**Student response**

The students evaluated the CA project very positively and mentioned increased knowledge about particular features of their first language, increased awareness of English and of many other languages, and pleasure in the opportunity to ‘show [their] knowledge of and passion for [their] first language.’

I increased my knowledge about nations and languages and about my classmates.
After comparing my L1 and English, I realize why I find it so hard to translate some things
I thought Korean was so different from all other languages so I was surprised to see similarities between my language and Persian.
It was fun to learn that Croatian is like my L1 Spanish as it doesn’t capitalize days of the week, languages, months or nationalities.
I assumed myself as a Korean language teacher when I did my presentation and I saw that there is no easy and specific way to teach such a hard thing as language
I didn’t know that English and Farsi are from the same language branch until I did research for my presentation
I like this CA assignment a lot because it requires listening and speaking and writing so it’s good for learning English
I was shocked to learn from my research that Urdu has some dialects that I never even knew about
I found myself becoming patriotic and being proud of my language especially when I spoke a sample for the class

After listening to all the presentations, each student submitted a short report that described five ways in which two other L1s are similar to his or her own.

So, over a full school year, I had paved the way for attention to and interest in L1 by introducing one LA – Canagarajah’s – and requesting that students consider their own. Course pressures meant that I was unable to give enough time to the personal stories; we stalled somewhat at timelines, and then we detoured into CA. Clearly, I need to revision literacy autobiography as a curriculum component.

**Revisioning**

What about next year? How will I improve on the enactment of the LA project? I will make efforts to have the Canagarajah article included as
a legitimate entry in the course kit, so that ensuing activities can be
given sufficient time and attention. That is, the constraints of the
existing course materials can be lessened. I will include one marked
LA assignment related to Canagarajah’s essay. While I had intended to
maintain LAs as dynamic written documents, with students adding to
their LAs throughout the year as writing experiences occurred, I now
realize that brief but frequent discussions about literacy incidents can
be oral as well. In this way, attention is maintained but is made less
formal. Furthermore, the CA assignment, which satisfied very nicely
the requirements for the oral presentation component, can be consid-
ered in many ways an integral part of an LA.

I do feel that my goals for initiating the LA activities were met. Both
the students and I learned about critical incidents in their personal
histories and, more generally, about what happens and what matters
in other languages. Students and teacher co-constructed this knowl-
edge. In my view, we did indeed engage in Cadman’s ‘transcultural
dialogues’ (2006), and students became familiar users of metalanguage
and linguistic terms (at least, they used them in class). Finally, the
students’ English writing skills and their familiarity with cultural
issues in Canada were not short-changed by the attention given to the
various L1s.

There was a symmetry in the fact that we began the semester by
considering how L1 writing conventions varied from or were similar
to Tamil and English conventions – and ended with students
considering how their L1 contrasted with English along five
dimensions. Students also noted how at least two other languages
shared features with their own L1.

This passage, penned more than 50 years ago, speaks to the additive
approach to literacy:

If we find anything that we have to change – and we do – we know that we
are touching something that goes deep into students’ pasts and spreads
wide in their personal lives. We will seek not to dislodge one habit in favor
of another but to provide alternative choices for a freer social mobility. We
seek to enrich, not to correct… By respecting students’ traditions and the
people from whom they come, we teach them to respect and to hold tight to
what they have as they reach for more. (Lloyd, 1954, p. 40, as cited in
Smitherman, 2003, p. 13)

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