

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**The Poetry Café: An On-line Writing Workshop for Refugee and
Newcomer Youth**

Christin Taylor
Department of English, Language and Literature
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
Email: c33taylo@uwaterloo.ca

Sana Abuleil
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Email: sana.abuleil@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to discuss the use of cross-disciplinary partnerships to design and implement a creative writing workshop for English-language learners (ELLs) in an online setting. The methodology utilized collaborative, cross-disciplinary feedback and revision cycles to identify key areas of consideration in facilitating the workshop. The findings revealed cultural and grammatical considerations, emotional nuance considerations, idiomatic language considerations, and internal translation and time considerations in the creative writing process for ELLs. In addition, a reflection, after the completion of the workshop, revealed that while the curriculum successfully implemented three scholarly fields of knowledge, the advances made by this cross-disciplinary partnership hit substantial obstacles when delivered over a virtual platform.

Keywords: creative writing, translanguaging, second language writing, ELLs, online instruction

Introduction

In the spring of 2021, Sana and Christin created, coordinated, and led a 5-week online poetry workshop for refugee and newcomer youth in the Kitchener/Waterloo region. The objective of this paper is to discuss the process by which we designed the curriculum for online delivery with English-language learners in mind and then reflect on the efficacy, successes, and failures of that process. This objective is relevant, given the neoliberal agenda driving internationalisation in Canadian higher education, which is enrolling larger and larger numbers of translingual students and ELL students in Canadian writing classrooms (Johnstone & Lee, 2014, 2017; Knight, 2013). Given the exigency of this moment, writing instructors must find new and creative ways to decentralize the economic bent of internationalisation, which positions international students as human capital. It is imperative that writing-program administrators and instructors create writing curriculum that resists marginalizing linguistically diverse students, counts cultural and linguistic differences as assets, and leverages online-teaching platforms to this end. The theories and frameworks guiding our project were translingualism (Canagarajah, 2013), second-language writing (Atkinson et al., 2015), and creative writing pedagogy (DelliCarpini & Gulla, 2012). The research questions were as follows: How can we maximize cross-disciplinary partnerships to build an online creative writing curriculum for English-language learners? What insights does each body of knowledge bring to the curriculum-building process? How can we adapt this for an online delivery that allows students to feel safe enough to create and share their work?

Literature Review

Our research begins with a translingual lens. As a language-based theory rooted in decolonial and antiracist scholarship, translingualism offers much promise for a writing classroom serving language and culturally diverse students (Canagarajah, 2006). A translingual lens decentralizes the ideal of the native English speaker, as it deconstructs curriculum and practices that marginalize students based on linguistic attributes (Williams and Condon). This lens encourages writing instructors to recognize the linguistic capacity that students bring to the classroom, rather than viewing linguistic differences as a deficit. Suresh Canagarajah (2013) defines the term, “translingual,” as the ability to “merge different language resources in situated interactions for new meaning construction” (pp. 1–2). In other words, translingual students do not switch between language tracks in their brain, but rather, they synthesize language resources across modes to create a new form of communication and discourse. This approach to English-language learners in the classroom values their linguistic diversity as a capacity to be championed, rather than a deficit to be ameliorated.

Pre-existing cross-disciplinary partnerships between translingualism and second-language writing can support translingual students in the Canadian writing classroom (Wright-Taylor, 2021). Combined with translingualism, second-language writing scholarship offers tangible guidelines for praxis, including how to treat ELL writers ethically in the classroom (Silva, 1997), how to account for the emotional and intellectual load ELL writers carry (Leki, 1995), and how to practically address the linguistic needs of language learners in the writing process (Leki et al., 2008).

The field of creative writing pedagogy offers a promising sandbox in which translingualism and second language writing can address the writing needs of translingual

students. Teacher-scholars engaged in teaching creative writing to English-language learners have observed how creative writing seems particularly suited to the culturally and linguistic tenuous dynamics of a writing classroom (Saito, 2008). By emphasizing expression, creativity, and imagination over grammar and standard English, creative writing allows linguistically shy students to thrive (Starz, 1995).

For this reason, we sought to create a poetry workshop for English-language learners in our community that began with a translingual framework, but implemented second language writing to support the linguistic and cultural capacities of our writers.

Methods

Given our research questions, we set about to identify knowledgeable workers in each field: translingualism (Taylor), education (Abuleil), and second-language acquisition (Conley). We then implemented a partnership model in which the knowledge experts collaborated on the curriculum and writing prompts. From there, we tailored the curriculum for online delivery, using Zoom and online engagement tools for the writing activities.

We partnered with Carizon, an organization specializing in the mental health of children and youth, youth engagement, and community wellness. Carizon is associated with Pathways Canada, a country-wide initiative targeted at at-risk youth. Pathways Canada works towards increasing graduation rates in low socioeconomic-status (SES) neighbourhoods throughout the country. We found our participants by emailing secondary-school students registered with Pathways Canada, specifically in Kitchener-Waterloo. We also emailed each student's support worker responsible for Pathways Canada youth in the region. All participants engaged in the program are high-school students, considered low-SES, and formally registered with Pathways Canada.

After establishing the length of the workshop, the delivery mode, and the format, Taylor designed an initial draft of the workshop curriculum, drawing on her translingual and creative writing training. From there Abuleil brought her expertise on educational policy, related to language learning and curriculum design to bear, by reading through the curriculum and offering feedback for revisions. After Abuleil offered her feedback, Conley read the curriculum, offering her insights as an teacher of English as a subsequent language at Conestoga College.

The collaborative curriculum process revealed four areas of consideration, in building a creative writing curriculum for English Language Learners:

- Cultural and Grammatical Considerations
- Emotional Nuance Considerations
- Idiomatic Language Considerations
- Internal Translation and Time Considerations

After each round of feedback, we updated the curriculum and language to account for the expertise each partner brought to the learning environment. From there, it was time to offer the workshop to our participants.

Results

Our lofty ideals about creating an accessible creative-writing curriculum for English-language learners soon hit the realities of technical hyjinx in an online setting. The pros of using Zoom included:

- the chat feature, which allowed linguistically shy students to write their questions and comments rather than speak them
- the annotate feature, which allowed the group to collaborate on drafting and revising poems together
- the ability to supplement the Zoom experience with added technology, such as ambient sound for the freewriting process

Taken as a whole, however, we felt that the virtual setting created more obstacles, than benefits, to the creative writing experience. The cons included:

- There were bandwidth difficulties: not all students had access to strong wi-fi.
- The option to turn off videos meant that it was harder to gauge if students were comprehending the content and engaging the creative writing process.
- Zoom funnels focus on a single facilitator, rather than toward a circular and collaborative posture, which is ideal for creative writing workshops.
- There was limited ability to differentiate instruction across audio, visual, and kinetic learning
- This previous point led to a lack of universal design.
- There were difficulties doing one-on-one check-ins with students, as they engaged in the creative-writing process.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the most successful part of the Poetry Café was the collaborative, cross-disciplinary partnership, between Taylor, Abuleil, and Conley to create an accessible creative-writing curriculum. However, future work in creating and coordinating online creative writing workshops for English-language learners needs to account for the material conditions of the learners. Do they have stable Internet access? What cultural holidays and norms might impact their ability to participate? In addition, creative writing instructors, seeking to engage students virtually, should be prepared for the learning experience to be more disembodied than the in-person experience. It was our experience that the creative-writing process tends to require a more embodied practice than teaching other subjects might. In light of this, we encourage future, online creative-writing instructors to prepare for the difficulties that arise from technology, and to look for ways to mitigate the disruptive force of these difficulties on the creative-writing process. Future research can consider how we help linguistically shy students feel supported by the technology, rather than limited by it. Finally, we encourage all writing instructors to utilize cross-disciplinary partnerships to build accessible curriculum for their English-language learners.

References

- Atkinson, D., Crusan, D., Matsuda, P. K., Ortmeier-Hooper, C., Rueker, T., Simpson, S., & Tardy, C. (2015). Clarifying the Relationship Between L2 Writing and Translingual Writing: An Open Letter to Writing Studies Editors and Organization Leaders. *College English*, 77(4), 383–386.
- Canagarajah, S. (2006). Toward a Writing Pedagogy of Shuttling Between Languages: Learning from Multilingual Writers. *College English*, 68(6), 589–604.
- Canagarajah, S. (Ed.). (2013). *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms*. Routledge.
- DelliCarpini, M., & Gulla, A. N. (2012). Success with ELLs: Make Room for Our Voices: Using POetry in Professional Development for Secondary ESL and ELA Teachers. *The English Journal*, 101(3), 92–94.
- Johnstone, M., & Lee, E. (2014). Branded: International Education and 21st-Century Canadian Immigration, Education Policy, and the Welfare State. *International Social Work*, 57(3), 209–221.
- Johnstone, M., & Lee, E. (2017). Canada and the Global Rush for International Students: Reifying a Neo-Imperial Order of Western Dominance in the Knowledge Economy Era. *Critical Sociology*, 43(7–8), 1063–1078.
- Knight, J. (2013). The changing landscape of higher education internationalisation – for better or worse? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 17(3), 84–90.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2012.753957>
- Leki, I. (1995). Coping Strategies of ESL Students in Writing Tasks Across the Curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(2), 235–260.
- Leki, I., Cummings, A., & Silva, T. (2008). A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing in English. *Reference and Research Book News*, 23(4).
- Saito, A. P. (2008). Between Me and the World: Teaching Poetry to English Language Learners. *Teaching Artist Journal*, 6(3), 197–208.
- Silva, T. (1997). On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 359–363.
- Starz, M. (1995). Communicating through Poetry in an ESL Classroom. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 2(1).
- Wright-Taylor, C. (2021). *“Sorry If My Words Aren’t Right”: Pre-existing Cross-Disciplinary Partnerships to Support Translingual, Visa-Students in the Canadian Writing Classroom*. University of Waterloo.