

## Creating a Space for Writers' Voices

*Translingual writing in middle and high school English classes*

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In March 2020, the NCTE released the *Position Paper on the Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners* (NCTE, 2020). Reading this paper prompted us to review the history of the NCTE's positions related to multilingual learners and to conduct a content analysis of positions, resolutions, and other statements posted on the NCTE web page (1970-2020). Our analysis suggests a clear call to action for teachers of English. In this paper we present an overview of multilingual learners in U.S. schools and explain translanguaging pedagogy as it relates to writing. We show the consistency between translanguaging pedagogy, mainstream philosophies for teaching writing, and the positions NCTE has taken. We conclude with practical suggestions for teachers of writing.

### MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS IN U.S. SCHOOLS

Approximately 9.5% of students in U.S. schools are designated English Learners (ELs). Consistent with other scholars in our field, we refer to ELs as multilingual learners, a term that focuses on their assets rather than on their lack of English proficiency (WIDA, 2019). Multilingual learners are a diverse population with regard to language, time in the United States, levels of English proficiency, and levels of education in their home or heritage languages. While multilingual learners' educational achievement varies, as a group they significantly underperform their English-speaking peers in English classes. This is unsurprising, as this gap is rooted in systemic issues. First, as the March 2020 NCTE position statement acknowledged, multilingual learners often receive their instruction from mainstream teachers who are underprepared to meet their specific needs. Additionally, assessments of multilingual students often show their perceived deficits

(lack of native-like English proficiency) rather than their assets (ability to communicate between languages). Assessing students solely in English also limits them from demonstrating the full range of what they know yet cannot fully express in English.

#### WHAT ARE TRANSLANGUAGING AND TRANSLINGUAL WRITING?

The theory of translanguaging (García & Li, 2014; Williams, 1994) explains that multilingual learners do not think in *either* English *or* their mother tongue; their multiple languages are not separate. Rather, they use their full linguistic repertoires in all settings. In a translanguaging English classroom, the teacher fosters spaces for students to develop writing skills in both English and additional languages through translanguaging practices (Canagarajah, 2013; Horner, NeCamp & Donohue, 2011; Horner & Tetreault, 2017). Translingual practices are based on the pedagogical stance that students' entire range of linguistic assets can be used in writing (Velasco & García, 2014) and include both code-switching and code-meshing.<sup>1</sup> Similar to renowned multilingual authors (e.g., Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticant, and Esmeralda Santiago) who might first compose in their mother tongue, English, or a combination of languages, multilingual learners need writing spaces that encourage composition in any language or a mixture of languages. Translingual practices differ greatly from sink-or-swim and Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) approaches. The former offers no specific support to multilingual students and assesses their writing against monolingual English standards. The latter, when effectively implemented, provides scaffolds such as sentence starters and graphic organizers in English to multilingual learners. Both sink-or-swim and SEI (only)<sup>2</sup> are stances that privilege English and thus, view multilingual learners through a deficit lens. In comparison, translingual instruction is squarely built on the assets of all students.

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<sup>1</sup> Lu and Horner (2013) define code-switching as switching between codes or languages while following their norms, whereas code-meshing is diverging from these norms by mixing or meshing codes.

<sup>2</sup> SEI is an instructional approach used within the regular English classroom or in a separate setting for multilingual learners. When effectively implemented, SEI strategies enhance comprehensibility and support the acquisition of English. Thus, SEI instructional strategies can be effectively used as *one* component of a rich translingual instructional program.

Research suggests that providing space for translingual writing leads to positive results for multilingual learners. For example, Zapata and Laman (2016) describe three teachers who, regardless of the level of their own multilingual competence, drew on students' linguistic resources and utilized dynamic, multilingual writing practices that "were not at the expense of learning to write in English, but instead embodied a more democratic and inclusive orientation to writing" (p. 93). Another study of Spanish speaking fourth grade students found that writing and translating bilingual text fostered an interest in writing and supported the development of metalinguistic awareness (Dworin, 2006). Similarly, Souto-Manning and Felderman (2012) found that bilingual writing practices can help develop an inclusive classroom environment for children from both bilingual and monolingual homes. By allowing students to use their entire linguistic repertoire when responding to learning logs and journal prompts, teachers can gain a better sense of students' writing abilities and content knowledge, foster a more culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom environment, and promote cross-linguistic transfer of writing skills (de la Luz Reyes, 1991; García & Kano, 2014). Even if the final composition is in English, students who are encouraged to engage in researching, reading, annotating, searching for vocabulary, and discussing texts in any language, are likely to be more engaged in the writing process. As a result, they gain a deeper understanding of the topic and continue to develop strong literacy skills across languages.

Voice develops  
when students  
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#### TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE AND "MAINSTREAM" TEACHING OF WRITING

Peter Elbow (2012) acknowledged that Standard Written English (SWE) has long been the language of prestige in U.S. schools at the expense of other Englishes. While Elbow (2000) writes about dialects of English, rather than languages other than English, he does entertain the possibility that mother tongue writing could be beneficial to multilingual learners. He cites Gilyard's (1991) seminal *Voices of the Self*: "Eradication of one's tongue is not a prerequisite to the learning of a second" (p. 160). Translingual writing practices value both the student's mother tongue and SWE.

Translingual writing practices are consistent with the seminal work of well-known experts in the teaching of writing. Graves (1994) (with a focus on younger learners), Elbow (1998, 2000, 2012), Murray (2004) and more recently Fletcher (2017) all make powerful arguments for fostering student voice by encouraging students to write as they think. According to Graves (1994) voice is the “driving force” that sustains writers through multiple drafts and revisions. Graves (1994, 2003) and Murray (2004) argue that voice develops when students focus on the information they want to convey, rather than on their words and grammar. Elbow also criticizes focusing on grammar and words early in the writing process, suggesting that when students are fixated on these features their writing may become less coherent (Elbow, 1998). Similarly, Fletcher (2017) recommends that teachers encourage students to engage in the kind of writing that is “raw, unmanicured, and uncurated (p. 39). He asserts that having choice and ownership in writing fosters the development of voice and writing for pleasure. Early in the writing process, students should be encouraged to “speak onto the page” (Elbow, 2012, p. 4); that is, at least in early stages of the writing process students should write as they speak, and flesh out their thoughts before they begin to clean up their language (Elbow, 2000).

Teachers remain underprepared to meet the needs of multilingual learners

Similar concepts are also central in the work of scholars who have investigated translanguaging and translingual writing. For example, Li (2011) notes,

The act of translanguaging then is transformative in nature; it creates a social space for the multilingual language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance, and making it into a lived experience (p. 1223).

Translingual practices also encompass other tenets of “mainstream” writing pedagogy such as helping individuals express their identities (Alvarez, Canagarajah, Lee, Lee, & Rabbi, 2017; Zapata & Laman, 2016) and using language with criticality and creativity (Li, 2011). Further translingual practices capitalize on the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that each student brings to the English classroom.

TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE AND THE NCTE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Findings from our content analysis of NCTE positions and resolutions strongly suggest that since at least the early 1970's the NCTE has been a staunch proponent of the rights of students to use their own languages. Twenty-two papers explicitly mention Englishes or English learners in terms of policy, teacher preparation, and practice (See Table 1). The NCTE's position on the rights of multilingual learners and the responsibilities of English teachers for this population of students has continually strengthened in response to ongoing research findings about language and second language acquisition, building a strong foundation for translanguaging. The NCTE first published the *Resolution on Students' Rights to Own Their Own Language* 46 years ago (November, 1974). Nine years ago, the NCTE adopted the *Resolution on Students' Rights to Incorporate Heritage and Home Languages* (NCTE, 2011). This resolution explains:

When students have opportunities to incorporate home languages in their construction of written texts, they (a) draw on a rich range of linguistic and cultural resources to express complex thought, (b) accelerate their acquisition of academic discourses, (c) develop multilingual abilities, (d) become more semantically and syntactically adept as they develop abilities in text comprehension and construction, and (e) enlarge their competency in public discourse. Importantly, they are afforded greater opportunities to develop writerly identities “reduc[ing] the distance between home and school, while helping [them] to become more invested in school learning. (n.p.)

The resolution continues by drawing parallels between the writing practices of multilingual learners and well-known authors such as Alice Walker, Gary Soto, Amy Tan, Pedro Pietri, Joy Harjo, Pat Mora, and Alma Flor Ada, and states, “in the same way, students and their audiences can benefit from opportunities and encouragement to draw on varied linguistic and cultural resources in their writing.” And finally, in 2020, the NCTE issued a position statement stating

Instead of suppressing students' additional language abilities, teachers can facilitate their using all their language(s) to make sense of school concepts and express their perspectives. As learners

develop their linguistic repertoire, they also learn how to select from these resources to represent their perspectives appropriately for any given situation—which at times may mean in a specific variety of English. (NCTE, 2020)

*Table 1. NCTE Resolutions and Positions on the Teaching of Multilingual and Bi-Dialectical Learners*  
(<https://ncte.org/resources/position-statements/all/>)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Month</i>	<i>Title</i>
1974	November	Students' Rights to Their Own Languages
1974	November	Preparing Teachers for Linguistically Different Students
1980	November	Responsibility of English Teachers in a Multilingual, Multicultural Society
1982	November	English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education
1986	November	English as the Official Language
1994	November	Language Study
1997	November	Developing and Maintaining Fluency in More Than One Language
1999	November	Bilingual Education
2003	November	Affirming the CCCC Students' Rights to Their Own Language
2005	November	Supporting Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners in English Education
2005	November	El Día de los Niños- El Día de los Libros
2008	July	English Language Learners: An NCTE Policy Research Brief
2008	November	English Only Instructional Practices- or Policies check
2011	November	Students' Right to Incorporate Heritage and Home Languages in Writing
2014	November	CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing
2015	March	CCCC National Language Policy
2015	July	Position Statement in Support of Ethnic Studies Initiatives in K-12 Curricula
2018	July	Statement on Anti-Racism to Support Teaching and Learning
2018	October	Expanding Opportunities: Academic Success for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students
2019	July	Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age
2019	July	Statement on Opportunities to Learn
2020	March	Position Paper on the Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners

FOSTERING TRANSLINGUAL WRITING IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL  
ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

So, it's 2020 and ¿*dónde estamos?* Although as early as 1980 the NCTE “voiced concern that this knowledge was not being widely applied in the nation’s classrooms” (NCTE, 1980, n.p.), current research indicates that teachers remain underprepared to meet the needs of multilingual learners (Villegas, SaizdeLaMora, Martin, & Mills, 2018). Further, as teacher educators we have seen little evidence of translanguaging writing in mainstream English middle and secondary classrooms. This observation causes us to pose the question, “As a middle or secondary teacher of English, what can you do to ensure that your classroom practices are grounded in the philosophy of widely accepted authorities on the teaching of writing, including the NCTE?” We conclude this article with a few suggestions:

1. At the beginning of the year, let students know that you value multilingualism. Talk about its importance in an increasingly globalized world. If you have experiences learning languages, share these with your students. Have students share their perspectives about multilingualism and create a class list of languages that students know or speak at any level. Have students write something in their languages or combination of languages. For example, have them create a poster that shows how to say hello in their language. Display multilingual posters prominently.
2. Model for students that good writers often begin writing by putting their thoughts on paper using the language(s) they speak (including various dialects and languages): at this stage, the focus should be on the ideas, not form. A multilingual mind map is a great example of translanguaging pre-writing. Just as we sometimes use visual literacies to get our ideas down by adding pictures to our mind maps, we can also use our literacies in any language to do the same. SWE is no one’s first language and it is not the only language in which ideas can be shared as is clearly illustrated by multilingual authors
3. Introduce mentor texts from authors who write translingually, such as Esmeralda Santiago, Isabel Quintero, Gene Luen Yang, or Tomi Adeyemi. For a useful article about multilingual writers see <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2018/may/inside-bilingual-writer-erik-gleibermann>

4. Foster a translanguaging environment in which students are comfortable using their full linguistic capacity to communicate knowledge and ideas. Encourage students who share a language to discuss their writing in any language they choose. Have students create bilingual books, translingual presentations, or multilingual, multimodal digital stories. For a useful guide on translanguaging writing pedagogy see <http://www.cuny-nysieb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/TLG-Pedagogy-Writing-04-15-16.pdf>
5. Encourage students to write journals and take notes translingually. Do the same with first drafts of papers even when the ultimate goal may be a product written in SWE. Again, the goal is to focus on ideas and content first - just as when writing in English only.
6. See the Tenets of Translingual Writing key points at [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/teacher\\_and\\_tutor\\_resources/translingual\\_writing/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/teacher_and_tutor_resources/translingual_writing/index.html)

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