

SHUCK, GAIL  
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY  
1910 UNIVERSITY DR. DEPT OF ENGLISH BOISE ID 83725  
gshuck@boisestate.edu

**“On a Chain of Hopes, That’s Where I Belong”:  
Creativity, Second Language Learning, and the Nature of Literate Knowledge**

When writing in English, students whose first language is something other than English are usually identified by their errors, even more conspicuously than many basic writers are. We often notice a lack of articles (*a* or *the*), incorrect verb tenses and prepositions, and ungrammatical syntactic links between ideas. These errors tell us that the writer has not learned everything that native speakers know about the linguistic structure of English.

Of course, to go undetected as nonnative speakers, most ESL students would either have to have spent most of their social and academic lives using English, in which case we have to question whether they are in fact nonnative speakers at all, or would have to get someone to do some serious editing, which has its own problems associated with it. To be able to write an essay, or a lab report, or even a postcard in a second language is a task that requires a hugely complex understanding of the linguistic structure of that language. We have to recognize the vastness of that knowledge and appreciate the internal struggles that most writers in a second language go through just to write what they did. More importantly for this paper, however, we also have to understand that grammatical competence is only one kind of competence in using language.

Linguistic anthropologists Dell Hymes and John Gumperz significantly expanded the answer to the question, “What does it mean to know a language?” when they introduced the term *communicative competence* in the 1960s. They argued that native speakers of a language know not only the grammar and the vocabulary of that language but also the ability to know what to say when to whom. That is, communicative competence also involves a rhetorical sense—a sense of the power of any language to meet particular needs at particular times with particular audiences. It must therefore involve metacommunicative competence. That is, we all, as native speakers of a language, have the ability to step outside of language and talk about it. We can say,

“What I’m trying to say is...,” or “I did, too, apologize!,” or “That’s not what I meant,” all of which indicate a conscious recognition of language as a system that allows speakers and writers to make choices between alternative forms. It is this metacommunicative ability that underlies literacy in general and is in fact central to students’ attempts to work—and to play—with language. My presentation today focuses on the use of poetry and narrative in an ESL writing course. I argue that having students write narratives, poems, and other creative pieces serves two primary purposes. First, it gives us a much richer picture of students’ ability to use language. Second, it actually plays an important role in students’ acquisition of literate knowledge.

On the first day of one of my first-year ESL writing courses, I usually begin with a discussion of the ways we answer the question “Where are you from?” I do this partly as an ice-breaker but also as a way for students to reconceptualize the common relationship between identity and nation of origin. When asked this question—as my students are, more frequently than most would like—they almost invariably answer with the name of the country they came to the U.S. from. We talk about why that might be, and I also ask students to envision answering in a different way—a way that might tell the asker a little more about who they are.

This discussion leads to the first reading assignment: a poem called “Where I Am From,” by George Ella Lyon, who was born in Harlan, Kentucky, and who writes poetry as well as children’s books. Here is the whole poem:

I am from clothespins,  
    from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
    (Black, glistening  
    it tasted like beets.)  
I am from the forsythia bush,  
    the Dutch elm  
    whose long gone limbs I remember  
    as if they were my own.  
  
I’m from fudge and eyeglasses,  
    from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from perk up and pipe down.  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.  
Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments—  
snapped before I budded—  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

I won't read through it here, but you can see some obvious parallel structures (“from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,” “from fudge and eyeglasses,” “from Imogene and Alafair,” “fried corn and strong coffee,”), some repeated images of trees—both literal and metaphorical—and a huge range of sensory details: voices, tastes, pains, pictures. After we discuss the poem in class, looking at some of those structures and working through some of the vocabulary, we revisit the question of where we're all from. I ask students to write down specific details from their respective childhoods—foods, hiding places, people's names, things people said a lot, etc. And then, as you can imagine, I have them write a poem of their own as homework.

When I first gave this assignment, I worried that the poem was too difficult for my students and that they'd have trouble writing anything based on a model they didn't understand. But then they turned in their poems. I was moved, not only by the *content* of some of the students' responses: war, murder in the streets, moving from country to country to country. I was also impressed with their understanding of what it means to write a poem: that is, their own poems clearly revealed a level of literacy development that a focus on grammar

mistakes alone would not allow us to notice. I'll focus on one here, by a student from Mexico whose parents are migrant farm workers and never went to college. This was his first draft:

“Where I’m From”  
by Pedro Navarrete

I am from a naked table  
surrounded by beans and corn,  
from the wet dirt smell,  
and the shiny days.

I am from the flowered hills and the cattle noise,  
from the muddy boots,  
and the ocean waves,  
that’s where I was born.

I am from the freedom,  
and children happiness,  
from the thorns in your way along,  
from the land of dreams  
that’s where I come from.

On a chain of hopes  
that’s where I belong,  
where the love is food,  
and the noise a song,  
where the moon don’t hide  
in a cloudy night,  
I am from there  
where the trees don’t die  
in a milky fall.

where there is a hand,  
everywhere you go,  
that’s where I am from.

That Pedro is no beginner at using English should be obvious, but even this poem has evidence of his nonnativeness: “from the freedom, and children happiness,” “the moon don’t,” “where the love is food.” (In Spanish, many general abstract nouns like “life,” “love,” “poverty,” and “nature” take the definite article “the.” This was just as likely to be a case of transfer from the first language as it is to be a deliberate choice to specify which love is food.) Of course, when we

look *beyond* the grammar errors (and the one spelling error), we notice strategies like the parallel structure of these lines:

I am from the flowered hills and the cattle noise,  
from the muddy boots,  
and the ocean waves,

Notice also the use of alliteration—“where the trees *don*’t *die*—and imagery—“in a milky fall.” I was also impressed with his line, “On a chain of hopes, that’s where I belong,” particularly because I knew he was in the CAMP Program (College Assistance Migrant Program), working toward something better than his parents had, and that they came to the U.S. to work toward something better than they had in Mexico: a chain of hopes. In a very real sense, Pedro is playing with language in this poem. He’s manipulating words and phrases deliberately in order to create an aesthetic effect.

I’d like to use an excerpt now from a different student’s writing. Jan, a 30-something-year-old from Romania, is much more obviously a nonnative English speaker than Pedro is. He is not as fluent in speaking and translates lots of words from Romanian as he writes. It was clear when he turned in his first essay in my class—a description of his experience in an earthquake when he was 11 years old—that he got no outside help with it. But the details and the poetry in it astounded me. He writes, “Plates, cups, and glasses from the sideboards began to fall and became a thousand pieces on the kitchen floor, sharpened bloody traps for our undressed feet....The water in its fury began to throw the fish from our aquarium and hit them on the floor.” Later in the essay, he recounts the neighbors’ streaming out into the streets holding candles to make sure everyone was all right and to find comfort in each other’s presence.

[OHP: “In my nostrils came the smell from their big candles. ‘What panorama with those moving lights!’ I said to myself. ‘And look at Mr. V’s face; what horrible is his flickering

countenance! He looks like a ghost! I cannot find his eyes; I see only two symmetric big dark spots in his flaring face.”]

When the electricity finally came back several days later, he talks about being able to watch TV and “see the real face of our town. The cruel face of calamity (which was hidden in the darkness earlier), was now displayed by ‘the blast of light’ through the ‘Power On’ effect.” The draft just before this final one read, “the cruelly face of calamity.” The distinction between nouns and adjectives and between adjectives and adverbs continues to be a difficult one for Jan, although he fixed it with the word “cruel” in this version. But we can tell a great deal more about his literacy level—his communicative competence—by seeing his ability to use metaphors, vivid details, alliteration, internal dialogue, and contrasts between light and darkness and between childhood thoughts and adult reflection. He clearly is able to use language to his advantage, despite his incomplete knowledge of English syntax. It’s not simply creativity that he has, although that’s undeniably a big part of what seems so “literary” about his writing. It’s also a recognition of the potential of language to create bonds between readers and writers and to help him to come to new perspectives on past experiences.

Seen from the perspective of this rhetorical, metacommunicative sense of literacy, Jan appears to be much more literate than Pedro. He does need to learn some English-specific grammar rules and other conventions of academic writing in English, but he has a kind of rhetorical skill that Pedro needs to develop further. Let’s look at Pedro’s work again. He had a terrible time with his first two essays in the class. He worried that he never had enough to say, and in fact, he had trouble developing his ideas into paragraphs longer than 2 or 3 sentences. And those paragraphs would be strung together to form drafts of only 1 or 2 pages long. But I am certain that his ability to write that poem—he even knew he had done a good job with it—gave him the confidence he needed to bring the literate knowledge that was already there to other

kinds of writing beyond poetry. And indeed, he did. He wrote 3 or 4 drafts of his narrative essay, during which time he learned something about the episodic structure of stories—the “chunking” of narratives into sections—and by the end of semester, he was able to apply that understanding to the structure of paragraphs. The final draft of his final paper was 6 pages long—and 6 clearly explained, well organized, conceptually complex pages, at that. He didn’t learn everything he knew about writing in that one semester. He already had a sense of genre, of metaphor, and of the ways sounds and words can be manipulated for aesthetic effects. These are components of metacommunicative competence that exists universally, even if the particular genres, particular metaphors, particular sounds vary from language to language. Pedro drew heavily on this metacommunicative competence to write “Where I’m From.” He also drew on his sense of play. Unlike most students, he learned to apply these aspects of communicative competence to other forms of writing all in one semester. For most students, that development happens much more slowly. The fact that Pedro took that apparently huge leap in literacy acquisition so quickly is a testament to his having had a highly developed literate knowledge already—a kind of knowledge that cuts across cultures and languages.

All children from all cultures use rhymes or other forms of sound play. Applied linguist Guy Cook elegantly argues that the pervasiveness of play with language indicates that it is far from superfluous to the learning of language; rather, it’s essential. Citing research in areas as diverse as early childhood literacy in the U.S. (Cazden, 1976; Goswami, 1995), psychobiological reactions to verse rhythms (Turner, 1992), and children’s play across cultures (Burling, 1966), Cook argues that there is an important link between rhythm, rhyme, and other forms of repetitious sound play, on one hand, and the development of literacy, on the other. Children develop their metalinguistic knowledge as they change only parts of words to make rhymes,



make up nonsense words like “eenie meenie miny moe,” and play with their voices to create characters.

This link between language play and literacy development continues into adulthood, and not only in overtly playful or fictional worlds. Here is my favorite quote from anthropologist Clifford Geertz. This is from a scholarly article in which he notes the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, in this case between history and anthropology: He writes about “a change in the ecology of learning that has driven historians and anthropologists, like so many migrant geese, onto one another’s territories: a collapse of the natural dispersion of feeding grounds that left France to the one and Samoa to the other” (1990, p. 324). Geertz uses a memorable analogy, parallelism and even rhythm in ways that help us to understand the increasing cross-over between the fields. It’s not just a cute way of putting it. It’s a mark of a highly skilled language user and a rigorous scholar who can conceptualize a fairly abstract, historical relationship between disciplines. Play, then, can actually extend our ability to do critical, scholarly thinking.

Does this mean we all have to incorporate poetry into our courses? No. Of course, it would be interesting to include the occasional piece of what we usually think of as literary writing with the course readings to show students different ways of making sense of the world around us. The poem “Where I Am From” includes references to phenomena that chemists, botanists, linguists, psychologists, theologians, geologists, and historians study. Letting students compare the more canonically scientific texts in those fields to the more canonically literary ones about the same basic subject can actually increase their metacommunicative competence. And that’s what we want. Developing communicative competence in the broader sense is a necessary step in their development as writers and critical thinkers. But even if we don’t bring in new texts, we should, as members of our respective fields, be able to examine with our students examples of good writing in those fields and encourage them to find surprising turns of phrase, parallel

structures, an elegantly logical argument, or a well-constructed graph. We might be surprised to see poetry in unexpected places.

At the very least, I urge you to consider the presence of second language learners in your classes and to try as many ways as you can to help them develop their communicative competence. Particularly for those students, but also for monolingual English speakers, the opportunity to use language in a wide variety of ways is critical to their becoming more fluent, more articulate speakers and writers. Paradoxically, students can employ the universal phenomenon of play—this cross-cultural, cross-linguistic kind of literate knowledge—as a means of access to the particular literate practices of particular discourse communities.

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