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CLA-Informed Self-Disclosure of Language Learning in the Writing Center

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Language scholars have long recognized the potential of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) as a transformative pedagogical tool, especially in the context of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction. According to Norman Fairclough, CLA is a critical perspective that cultivates an awareness of “how language conventions and language practices are invested with power relations and ideological processes which people are often unaware of” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 7). Proponents of CLA argue that it exposes the pervasive harms of linguisticism, “the ideologies, structures, and practices that are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined on the basis of language” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023, p. 10).

CLA pedagogy calls on both teachers and students to understand the larger historical, political, and socioeconomic forces impacting language education and their position relative to those forces. CLA-informed methods celebrate and develop the diverse linguistic competencies of EAL and EAP students, allowing them to claim and maintain their authorial agency in the process. Despite its prevalence in scholarship, comprehensive guides to applying CLA in the university classroom have only recently begun to appear (Shapiro, 2022; Taylor et al., 2018), and little has emerged on applying CLA to writing center instruction (Lape, 2019; Shapiro, 2022,

p. 318; Wilkes, 2018). The hegemony of EAP can make receiving feedback an intimidating or even detrimental experience for writing center students of all linguistic backgrounds, let alone EAL users and first language (L1) users of non-standard English(es). Applying CLA principles in writing center consultations can help tutors reassure and engage students while giving them constructive and substantive feedback.

In this teaching tip, I will explain how writing tutors can use CLA-informed self-disclosures of their own language learning to welcome and encourage EAL and EAP students into the writing center. Most teachers use self-disclosure unconsciously and intuitively, not realizing that it is a well-researched teaching tool associated with significant findings both in person and online (Cayanus, 2004; Song et al., 2016). According to CLA pedagogy, however, self-disclosure should be used with care, especially in the more personal setting of the writing center, and tutors must continually reflect on and recognize their linguistic privilege (Godley et al., 2015; Wilkes, 2018). Writing centers are implicitly coded as spaces for White users of standard English(es) such as myself (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Valles et al., 2017). By modeling ourselves as struggling language learners, and especially as learners of EAL students' most common home languages, tutors can instead present the writing center as a more welcoming, plurilingual space.

This approach resulted from reflecting on my own linguistic positionality as a White L1 English user, writing tutor, writing instructor, and scholar with an academic background in Medieval Studies. Early on in my one-on-one teaching practice, I often found myself referencing my experiences as a learner of European languages to encourage and commiserate with my students. While these examples were certainly effective, they were even more effective when I disclosed that I was a learner of non-hegemonic languages, especially when the students themselves could demonstrate their own linguistic expertise and assist me as a novice learner of their home language. This relatively minor adjustment to my teaching practice has helped me better recognize and celebrate my

students' diverse linguistic competencies and promote their agency as authors.

Context

This tip was developed at a university writing center serving a sizeable EAL student population. It could also be adapted for use during class time in a secondary- or university-level composition course, especially when introducing students to EAP.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will perceive their writing center or classroom as more plurilingual and feel more welcome.
- Students will be encouraged to learn EAL/EAP as their tutors model their own language-learning struggles and achievements.

Course Format

Although I originally used this tip during face-to-face writing center appointments, it can also be adapted for online use, either synchronously or asynchronously. Instructors can also implement this method during office hours or in the classroom, including in-person, remote, or hybrid modalities.

Teacher Preparation

- Research the student population of your university community. How many of these students speak a home language other than English? What are the home languages of the students who use your writing center or attend your classes?
- Take a few hours and learn some fundamentals about your EAL students' most common home language(s). You don't have to become an expert user; just learn a few things about the most common home language(s) of the EAL students

you work with. Gain a sense of the pronunciation rules, writing conventions, and major grammatical features. In what fundamental ways is the language like and unlike English? What advantages do speakers of this language enjoy when learning English, and what are the most common challenges they encounter? If your writing center has a director or works with a writing center consultant, these are questions that they can likely help you answer.

Estimated Time

The time required for this approach varies depending on how much language learning is desired and how much self-disclosure is needed to make students feel valued and encouraged.

Procedure

This tip does not lend itself to a step-by-step procedural breakdown but works best to address language learning issues during one-on-one conversations or class time. When these opportunities present themselves, share your experiences with language learning, especially your newly acquired knowledge of your students' home language(s), to welcome, commiserate with, and encourage EAL/EAP students. See the Appendix for specific examples, but here are some general points to keep in mind:

- During one-on-one interactions, such as a writing center appointment or during office hours, tailor your disclosure to that student's needs.
- However, remember that due to the demographics of your writing center or classroom, some disclosures might work for a significant percentage of your students and across assignments.
- While each writing center's linguistic and institutional context is unique, you may find yourself developing disclosures that you can use in different institutional contexts.

- Even small personal anecdotes will make your students feel their plurilingual experience is valued and supported by a fellow language learner. In cases of instructors with a positionality like mine, they will also appreciate that a White L1 English speaker is trying to learn a less hegemonic language despite their position of linguistic privilege.

Caveats and Alternatives

This tip will work better for users of the home languages most seen at your writing center. While tutors cannot be expected to learn all home languages or become fully proficient in the most prevalent ones, students with less common home languages will still be reassured by their tutors' shared struggles and achievements with language learning—especially if the relationship between the tutor's L1 and the language studied disrupts the typical educational dynamic of the North American writing center (e.g., an English speaker learning Punjabi).

Be mindful that this tip represents a small step toward making North American university writing centers more plurilingual. As you strive to value non-hegemonic languages and dialects in your teaching practice, do not forget the central tenets of CLA pedagogy: In their lived experiences, your students will continue to experience linguisticism. Your actions or beliefs will not change this. To ignore this reality will undermine your work together and risk reproducing a linguisticist version of the “color blind” fallacy so problematic to current anti-racist pedagogies. You must remain aware that linguisticism is alive and well both inside and outside your institution and work to make writing students and tutors aware of this truth (Shapiro, 2022).

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Appendix

Examples of CLA-Informed Self-Disclosures Applied to a Specific Institutional Context

1. Whenever you have time, take a few minutes before an appointment with an EAL student to learn how to pronounce their name correctly. Your linguistic research will likely come in handy here since it will have focused on a substantial portion of your EAL student body. For example, about 70% of the EAL student population served by my writing center used Mandarin as an L1 (first language) or a very familiar L2 (second language), so learning more about pronunciation, transliteration, and naming conventions in Mandarin proved extremely helpful. You may or may not succeed at pronouncing the student's name well when you first greet them, but your effort will be noticed and much appreciated. You could then ask the student to give you pronunciation tips since you are trying to learn more about their language. You will find that students are happy to support your language learning efforts before you, in turn, support theirs (see also Pennesi, 2017).
2. When an EAL student is struggling with a grammatical concept present in English but not in their home language, you could often say something like: "Well, don't be too down on yourself. It makes sense that you're having difficulty with when to use 'a' and 'the' since something like that doesn't exist in your home language. I'm learning Mandarin right now and am struggling to learn the four tones since English is not a tonal language. So, it's not surprising that it's tough for us, but we'll keep working at it, and eventually, we'll get it." This kind of encouragement will help the student feel that their plurilingual writing is valued and supported by a fellow language learner instead of being judged

and corrected by an “all-knowing,” White, middle-class L1 English speaker.

3. When students seem particularly frustrated, ask them how long they have been learning English. Some of their answers will impress you, as EAL students may have moved from beginner to university-level proficiency in a surprisingly short timeframe. However, no matter the answer, congratulate the student on their language-learning achievements. Note that they can now write university-level assignments in English while you are still working on foundational skills in whatever home language you are learning.
4. Remember that EAP students are not necessarily EAL students. As mentioned above, CLA-informed self-disclosure can also make your writing center or classroom more inclusive for students who are L1 users of diverse English(es) or L1 users of more standard English(es) who are simply new to EAP. You can model difficulties from your time as an undergraduate familiarizing yourself with academic conventions, which is challenging for many students regardless of linguistic background. For example, you can recount to your students how much you disliked writing conclusions as a first-year student: “I didn’t see the point of them and was so tired by the end of the paper that I just wrote whatever popped into my head so that I could get it done. But then I started to see how great they were at giving your reader a nice summary of your paper as they ‘walk out the door.’” Whatever their experience with EAP, all students can benefit from knowing that their teacher also had to get accustomed to the academic conventions and terms they are still working to grasp.