



## Separated by a Common Language: Linguistic Relativity in a College Composition Course

**This article is a reflection on teaching British literature to multilingual/Generation 1.5 students in the US. By studying the literature and culture of England, undergraduates were better able to examine and write about the language and culture of the US. Students learned about variation among World Englishes, including variations in transgressive language and the rhetorical force of such language. Students thus gained a greater understanding of the ways sociolinguistic factors such as register affect social and academic life.**

The genesis of this article is a recent conversation I had with a colleague about how to teach British literature to American students. We agreed that it sometimes seems as if teaching the literature of another nation—or another time period—is like teaching a foreign language: As we teach the fundamentals of the second language we often need first to teach or reinforce those of the first language, and so I often approach the teaching of British literature using English as a second language (ESL) principles. Though the language of instruction is English, and most of the courses I teach are not officially ESL, in practice they *are*, because many of my students are either from other countries or their parents were—members of what is now called Generation 1.5. This means that I must also teach the language and culture of the US. In light of these issues, it has been necessary to develop different strategies and pedagogies to teach my American-born and newly American students how to read and write about British language, literature, and culture. Essentially, my aim as I teach content is to help students understand both their own, American, culture and language, at the same time they learn the target culture and language. What complicates teaching *content* to our students is that they often

lack the skills that would enable them to express the content, and often they do not possess the shared cultural or linguistic contexts that I have previously assumed when teaching content. It makes sense, then, to think about all of my students, not just those whose first language is not English, as potentially ESL learners and to apply ESL theories to my teaching of writing in all courses. Ilona Leki observes that

in certain ways theories about and insights into second-language acquisition may be useful for all writing teachers, since writing researchers, theorists, and teachers have pointed out that even in one's native language, learning to write is like learning a second language. (1992, p. 10)

With students in my classroom coming from dozens of ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, there is very little I can assume about what they already know regarding the culture and history of the country where they now live. For the purposes of this article I will focus only on what a linguist, or perhaps a linguistic anthropologist, would call “communicative competence”—not just knowing the definitions of words and the grammatical structure of a language, but, rather, knowing the appropriate environments in which to apply those linguistic rules and being able to “perform” language as well as “know” language. I am aware that neither I nor my students can “know” British literature or culture, just as we cannot “know” American literature or culture of an earlier time or other region of our vast country, but I can usually provide them with analogues. Through the years I have come to think of what I teach as literary anthropology, in that I help students understand the cultural codes of the literature and language they study.

How I approach teaching now is in marked contrast to my first job after graduate school, a traditional liberal arts undergraduate college where the students were from a largely homogeneous white, Southern American, upper-middle class, suburban background, and they were mostly well prepared for postsecondary education. They had good writing and reading skills, they were very comfortable with current events and history, and they were engaged and highly motivated. Those who were not exceptionally bright made up for it in effort because they understood that studying liberal arts meant the luxury of considering material that might not be immediately practical, but that would ultimately meet the curricular and societal goals of developing critical-thinking and reasoning skills. Oddly enough, the students at this liberal arts college were the easiest to teach because they felt very entitled to their education and understood the cultural

codes of college. Paulo Freire (1968/2002) would have considered them ideal participants in the problem-posing mode of education. At my current institution, however, it has become increasingly challenging to teach British literature, because there is generally no support for the teaching of literature. The mission of the City University of New York (CUNY) has always been to teach immigrants, their children, and the poor of New York City; the mission of my college is to instill professional and technical skills in sometimes very poor or working-class, and primarily minority, students. We focus on the teaching of writing skills. The problem lies not in the English Department, but in the institution itself. We are a college of technology without an English major and our students are not encouraged to regard the study of literature as much other than to fulfill a core curriculum requirement. Students are mostly career directed and consider the literature requirement irrelevant as they progress toward their degrees in practical and technological fields.

Because my students have very stressful and busy lives, during my first year at CUNY I wanted to give them a treat, one with no strings or assessment attached to it—story time—something they had most likely not encountered since they were about 10 years old. I decided to read to my two Composition II sections for the first 15 minutes of each period, just for the sheer pleasure of listening.<sup>1</sup> The book had to be challenging but not boring—a tall order, because my students are bored by most books. I chose the English novelist Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* (2001) because it is relatively current, sexually irreverent, and funny. Very briefly, *How to Be Good* is about a doctor, Katie, her freelance-writer husband, David, their children, her affair, and his conversion to a simpler and more ethical way of life after a chance meeting with an eccentric healer. David questions their comfortable life and decides that in order to live true to his recently acquired values, he must act upon them. So he begins to give away their “extras”—all the money in her wallet to a beggar, one of their computers to a women's shelter, the family's Sunday roast dinner to a homeless shelter, and a spare bedroom to a runaway teen—completely disrupting the family's finances and, more important, their sense of themselves as moral freethinkers. From the middle-class, white, liberal perspective of the novel's characters, these experiences are disconcerting—but for my students, what the fictional family was undergoing was completely foreign in several ways. I considered how Robert Kaplan's (1966) theory of contrastive rhetoric would apply to my course, because my students' knowledge of culture and language affects their ability to write in the target language and culture.<sup>2</sup> In this case, our class had to discover what some of our class and cultural biases were once we began

to discuss the text. In terms of Kaplan's graphics depicting rhetorical modes, the disruption in Katie and David's household occurred because their lives were no longer linear. My students, interestingly, were not concerned about the lack of linearity; instead, they were interested in the characters' insistence on it. Although Kaplan's categories have become criticized as restrictive, in a general sense they may still be useful when approaching the rhetorical and cultural differences among some students and their learning processes. It is always in the back of my mind that my way is not the only way. So, as I read to them and they listened to the text, we discussed the issues the novel raised; I hoped that doing so would help them develop other language skills. My aim was to help them become more fluent not only in their writing—which was my principal aim at the beginning of the semester—but also in becoming more adept in critical thinking and being able to make connections between culture, language, and reasoning.

To encourage my students not only to listen to the text, but also to think about how to write about it, I situated it within their familiar social and political contexts. It is counterproductive to engage in a discussion of writing or pedagogy without helping students make sense of it, and as I started reading Hornby's book right in the thick of our recent national insurance and health-care debate we addressed the variety of health-care options in the US, England, and also the countries from which they came. Many of my students are very familiar with the issues of socialized medicine, for most have no health insurance and must get care at an office subsidized by a state or city program. There they have to endure long lines, longer waits, indifferent practitioners, and difficult choices: Pay for this medicine or that telephone bill.<sup>3</sup> They are also aware that most doctors in the US do not work in clinics such as these and are often economically and socially elite. Such an impression is particularly prevalent in this community of students for whom a college degree may appear to be out of range for most of their family. Because Katie is a physician, at first my students thought she must be rich, with a very high social status. Then, when I described that she is employed by the National Health Service, my students believed that she worked at the sort of clinics they themselves go to, and that she was barely above working class. We had some very pointed discussions about how the National Health Service in Great Britain differs from our system—or Canada's, for that matter—and they learned that being a British doctor accords far less economic status than it does here, and that it means working for the government. This enabled us to explore how status—economic and social—is conferred in different contexts and naturally, I tried to explain that like physicians in the United Kingdom, professors in the US are what I call "high status, low

pay.” This revelation floored them, since many students come from cultures in which teachers are highly respected, professors even more so, and physicians the most. In the end, they still believe that status, education, and salary are related.

As we discussed the cross-cultural differences—or to use Ulla Connor’s (2004) more current term, “inter-cultural rhetoric”—we also discussed the relativity of language production and the creativity of English. In that sense, it is possible to be descriptivist pedagogically, rather than prescriptivist, because we can observe how language is used in literature and how meaning can be made more effective by not being “correct” or “proper.” In the realm of descriptivism, when I teach linguistics I present the different ways we use or generate new words, and one way English differs from other languages is in its productivity. But one example of how English is not so productive is in the area of infixing (as prefixes are word-initial morphemes and suffixes are terminal morphemes, infixes are morphemes placed in between). The best-known American example is *un-fucking-believable* (which, by the way, I discovered is in my spell-check dictionary), and the British is *abso-bloody-lutely* (which is not). These examples teach not only syntax but linguistic relativity, in the sense that in this case *fuck* and *bloody* are in some ways equivalent in meaning. I teach other kinds of word formation, such as compounding (*blueberry*), clipping (*maths*), and blending (*motel* from *motor hotel*), and a particularly student-worthy example of blending, which came up in Hornby’s novel when David and his friend Nigel are going on about “fuckwits” (from  *fucking twit*—a word I first came across in the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* [Fielding, 1996]).

One day I was reading a passage about an angry tirade in which David’s former editor is “chuntering.” Having no clue about the meaning myself, I asked my students to guess from textual clues and context. The character who is chuntering is “trying to attract the attention of the ‘Angriest Man in Holloway’” by saying things such as “Pick the fucking phone up,” “I know you’re there” (Hornby, 2001, p. 77). The students said *chuntering* meant “babble,” “complain,” “bicker,” and “rant.” They came very close but didn’t fully get it.<sup>4</sup> This gave me the opportunity to explain the idea made famous by George Bernard Shaw’s alleged remark that England and the US are “two nations separated by a common language” when I recounted how an English friend deciphered an email message from me that included the word *rambunctious*, a foreign one to him, which incidentally, means “wild” and “playfully out of control” (*Oxford English Dictionary/OED*). It is the diversity of linguistic experience and varieties of languages that enabled the students to conclude almost-but-not-quite the definition

of the word based on the context of the section but also from the personality of the character. It likewise helped that a few students had grown up or spent time in former British colonies. So, rather than assuming there is one standard version of English in the US—American English—our default assumption evolved: What I know is not what my students know and we all learned from each other. Because they are not monolingual or monocultural, we helped each other to learn new words and ideas sharing our knowledge of Englishes, as well as how other languages relate to English. They benefited from understanding that there is not one English that we must always use; rather, there are varieties of Englishes that we use in different conditions and for different audiences.

In the novel, that fictional conversation between David and his employer—and others like it—also provided us with ample opportunity to work out cross-cultural differences in the degree of severity of profanity. One British word that students could not comprehend is *sod*. Katie observes that David “has a loyal and loving and—sod it—a not unattractive or unintelligent wife.” It’s not that in the US we don’t know what a sodomite is, but that term doesn’t carry the same floridly semantic weight here. In this context, *sod it* is an emphatic expletive with the connotation of concession—*admit it* in transgressive form. This brings me to another term of abuse. Later on that same page, Katie is describing the difficulty a friend is having rousing David’s interest in his old pursuits of insulting the stupid or boring in society: “Nigel has just ended his attempt to attract David’s attention with a volley of abuse. He even used the c-word, although we all pretended we hadn’t heard it” (Hornby, 2001, p. 78). When I read that, some students whooped and others lowed because not only do they not expect someone older than they are to give voice to such language, but they are more shocked when their professor introduces it into a classroom. For them, *cunt* is the second-most offensive word in the American language, second only to *nigger*. I know this because when I teach a section on language and social context, I use *nigger* as an example of how meaning changes through time, across place, and with respect to gender and I have them list and then rate profanities (see, for example, works by Kennedy, 2002; Naylor, 1986). *Nigger* used by a white person is always considered the most heinous, followed by *cunt* (which even the normally swaggering males will not say aloud in class), and *fuck* is the third-most repellent word in American English. The fact that they will not even say *cunt* and profess to never using it in its unredacted form—but are reduced to using code (the “c-word”) as in the novel—means that it is a fearsome word. I contrast that with the more liberal and almost smug British use of the word (found in works by such ca-

nonical authors as George Orwell, Samuel Beckett, and others). In the US, *cunt*—like *nigger*—epitomizes all the essentializing and reductive hatred of an -ism and yet, when I try to introduce the concept of feminists’ “reclaiming” the word *cunt*, just like other groups have redefined *queer* and *nigger*—even *heeb*—students strongly resist.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the now-hegemonic coolness bestowed upon certain variants of *nigger*, though with the emphatically different, nonrhotic pronunciation “nigga,” in contemporary, male, hip-hop culture, our almost universal revulsion at using the “c-word” signifies the degree to which women are disempowered and men recognize the subordination of women. The pedagogical significance of this discussion emerged from these examples, demonstrating semantic relativity—how we make meaning based on cultural codes particular to time and place, even who has permission to use certain language.<sup>6</sup>

One class discussion about semantic broadening taught me something about the history of English as well as contemporary versions of Spanish. In *How to Be Good*, the word *cuckold* comes up when Katie’s former lover Stephen has come to their home to negotiate with David for her affections. Stephen says,

“I thought, why not take the bull by the horns, sort of thing?”  
“Horns being the operative word,” says David. “Seeing as I’m wearing them.”  
“Sorry?”  
“The horns. Cuckold. . . . Stupid joke.”  
(Hornby, 2001, pp. 109-110)

Assuming that my students would not recognize the reference, I asked them if they understood. I gave them the English definition that when a woman is unfaithful, her male companion is said to be “cuckolded,” but I was corrected. My students—many of whom were from Colombia, Puerto Rico, or the Dominican Republic, and have Spanish as their first language or home language—told me that the term for “cuckold” in Spanish is *cuerno*, and that a man who is cuckolded is a *cornudo*. They also told me that in Spanish, the term can now apply to a woman as well as to a man. This is in striking contrast to English, where the term has remained strictly gendered as male, and in a derogatory way. Because many of the students are bilingual, their knowledge of semantics enriched the discussion immeasurably. This new gendered language is a fairly recent occurrence in urban youth culture; for example, the young, urban word *ho* (a version of the word normally pronounced “whore”) has come to apply to both women and men, again with rhotic deletion in the final consonant in urban

youth dialect. The semantic broadening of *ho* strikes me as reflecting changing sexual mores and a sort of democratization that gives more autonomy to young women, paired simultaneously with derision for young men who have multiple female sexual partners. This does not seem to be an equally positive linguistic change, however, but is fascinating nonetheless.

In a friendly discussion between the scholars of applied linguistics and rhetoric Paul Matsuda and Dwight Atkinson about the future of contrastive rhetoric, Matsuda suggests that the field should investigate

rhetorical practices, including textual features (but not limited to that), different traditions, different historical moments, and also how they interact with each other, and how they might change over time as they encounter different rhetorical practices or demographic shifts, or linguistic shifts, etc., and not necessarily tied directly or strictly to the analysis of texts.

He later suggests that contrastive rhetoric could also be revised and split up into different fields, such as

interlanguage pragmatics, it could be second language writing, it could be discourse analysis or discourse studies . . . [a]nd also TESOL, which frequently overlaps with applied linguistics and composition studies, and communication education. (2008, p. 291)

In my own version of teaching contrastive rhetoric, the first view of the field makes more sense, as I approach the teaching of writing and language from the perspective of teaching history and culture. What I like about the first definition of the future of contrastive rhetoric is that it applies to how I've come to teaching writing and language: through the study of linguistic change and national or social identity in texts. I take a relativistic view of textual analysis and encourage students to see the variations of language and writing—through time and across oceans.

Each time I introduce a lesson on history, culture, and politics in a literature course, I usually start out with “Several hundred years ago . . .” and excitedly launch into a disquisition, just as I did when one of Hornby’s characters describes the way one of Katie and David’s children begins to engage in petty thievery at school after David has donated the children’s computer, comparing him to the “Artful Dodger” (Hornby, 2001, p. 153). This literary reference allowed me to explain the stereotypes in *Oliver Twist* and how Dickens played on the



popular perception of Jews as thieves, schemers, and usurers. Literary anti-Semitism, of course, has a long and tedious history: Dickens introduces Fagin, for example, as standing before a fire, holding a fork in hand, with a “villainous and repulsive face, and a quantity of matted red hair” (Walsh, 2005, para. 16). As red hair was worn by the Devil in medieval mystery plays, as well as by Jews in some European iconography, Fagin is linked to the Devil. Moreover, as John Walsh forcefully asserts:

Dickens several times refers to Fagin as the “merry old gentleman,” an ancient euphemism for the devil, as is the phrase Bill Sikes uses when he says Fagin looks as if he has come straight from “the old ’un without any father at all betwixt you.” In the literary subconscious Fagin is . . . a Mephistophelean devil who seeks out Christian children. In Fagin’s prison cell, Oliver offers to pray with the condemned man. “Say only one, upon your knees, with me, and we will talk till morning.” But the Jew is impervious to these Christian entreaties. Whatever Dickens’ intention he was peddling a myth that has poisoned the psyche of the Western world. (2005, para. 16-17)

Though my students had never read *The Merchant of Venice* or any of the other texts that refer similarly to Jews, they were quite familiar with the stereotypes, particularly because they are for the most part from Brooklyn, home to a large population of Hasidic Jews. They were not, however, familiar with how canonical literature participates in the perpetuation of those cultural myths. It was a good way to open up discussion to how literature and culture are interdependent and manage to permeate their unconscious minds (in the way that Samuel Coleridge, not Freud, would have imagined the concept). What ended up happening was that after I gave my lecture on Middle Ages blood libel, Jews and money, and literature, I allowed them to distract me with the always bizarre “Why do ‘they’ x, y, and z?” questions and class quickly became what I call “Ask a Jew Day.” They peppered me with such queries as “Why do ‘they’ always put change down on the counter instead of in my hand?” or “Why do ‘they’ wear black?” “Why do ‘they’ have so many children?” and the always exasperating, “Why do ‘they’ keep to themselves?” It was particularly satisfying to explain to students, thus, in reference to that last question, how the word *ghetto* was not always “owned” by or applied to African Americans. It’s not that my students are rude; in fact, they’re exceedingly polite and kind, but they felt very comfortable with me and despite living in close proximity to one of the world’s largest Jewish communities, they were

mostly ignorant about their neighbors. Interestingly, however, it got us talking about what it means to be “American” and how stereotypes work against them as well. This inquiry about neighbors belonging to different cultures got them not only to listen more carefully to the text I was reading to them, but also to be more careful when some chose to write about the novel. Students paid more attention when they explained something unfamiliar and needed to support their claims from the text; I assumed that it was because they had to have that very topic explained to them and that they would then have to present unfamiliar information to others. One of the ideas that I have been able to present to students regarding both the teaching of writing as well as the concerns of linguistic relativity is that, using the model of World Englishes and the different circles of Englishes presented by Braj Kachru (1992), it is important to recognize that even in my classroom in the US, I am not teaching inner circle English language or culture. My students have learned English elsewhere, whether in their outer or expanding circle countries of origin, or in their neighborhoods in New York City. So, it is not only impossible to assume that I can teach inner circle English, but it would also be shortsighted to do so, since my students come from all of the circles of English. Moreover, as my experience with teaching British language and literature shows, it is not always fruitful to assume that American English should be the target language.

Speaking of stereotypes, when discussing *How to Be Good* we often returned to the subject of class. Katie, the protagonist, is constantly reminding the audience that she’s a doctor, that because she’s a doctor she’s automatically “good” and should be cut some moral slack. Just as often she narrates herself by her “postal code” of Holloway. I tried to render her neighborhood in some analogous way to one in New York and the ones that seemed to adequately reflect emerging gentrification, combining cool and scruffy elements, are Tribeca in Manhattan or Park Slope in Brooklyn. The kind of characters who inhabit this novel, and parallel neighborhoods in New York City, are the self-aware, middle-class do-gooders who have been composting for years, mock those who shop at superstores such as Wal-Mart, and name their children after midtwentieth-century children’s book protagonists or biblical characters: Molly, Henry, Margaret, Katherine, Hannah, Zachary. These are people who have “made it.” In the book, Katie and David—a doctor and an editor—have felt justified in living oblivious to the suffering around them because what they do for a living or who they vote for or the check they send to support the whales absolves them of their sins of inaction. In Hornby’s novel, Katie says, “One of the reasons I wanted to become a doctor was that I thought

it would be a good—as in Good, rather than exciting or well-paid or glamorous—thing to do” (2001, p. 8).

After David has his ethical awakening, he explains to Katie that he wants for them to live differently, a life more mindful of suffering around them and the disparities in the world, and Katie, the physician who presumes that her profession should exempt her from additional social engagement, resists petulantly. Laura Miller writes about this scene that David’s

transformation . . . prompts him to tell Katie, “I’m a liberal’s worst nightmare.” But that’s not because he suffers from the conservative American Angry Guy’s delusions of rhetorical grandeur. It’s because he truly *has* become a liberal’s—specifically Katie’s—worst nightmare, something far scarier than a crank who’s picked up a couple of taunts from [a conservative talk show host]. David is no longer an Angry Guy; now he’s practically a saint. “I think everything that you think,” he explains to his wife. “But I’m going to walk it like I talk it.” (2001, para. 4)

The point that I’d like to make here, though, is that my students rightly pointed out that Katie and David and others like them, including their professors, have the *luxury* of composting, or riding their collapsible bicycles to work, or buying only organic food. These are benefits that only free time and money can buy, neither of which my students have. They and their parents struggle to learn English; navigate one of the most expensive cities in the world; manage school, work, and their own children; send money back to their families; and maybe defer their dreams to the next generation. But Hornby’s characterization is highly satiric, and it’s not necessarily easy to spot the satire when one does not understand the original. Students who may be not only the first in their family to go to secondary school, much less university, have a great deal of baggage to carry with them—just as Katie and David do—but their baggage often makes them want to acquire the very things and attitudes that Katie and David are shedding.

As I tell my writing students when they want to engage in what I term “freestyle” writing, one must learn the rules first before rejecting them. So, I had to learn that my students, rather than rejecting or mocking the middle-class lifestyles found in contemporary literature, actually aspire to them. It is fine, but I did not know that when I first began teaching in Brooklyn—and once I did know, I became the one who had to change. My experience confirms what Paul Matsuda has written:

Composition teachers need to resist the popular conclusion that follows the policy of containment—that the college composition classroom can be a monolingual space. To work effectively with the student population in the twenty-first century, all composition teachers need to reimagine the composition classroom as the multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language difference is default. (2006, p. 649)

I must say that where I teach, it would be foolish to think otherwise. It is worth acknowledging that in every composition classroom there will be writers with vastly different abilities. There is probably no such thing as a “traditional” student any more.

Returning to the theme of literary anthropology, because there is no way any of us can presume to understand the literature of another time or place in the way those who lived there or then did, I ask my students to think of themselves as scientists studying a culture that spreads and expands. I wish for them to imagine a literary work as an entity from which they are cut off by a lens of some sort. However, they can observe and take some ideas and theories away and apply them to what they already know. It took me some time to realize that explaining a “foreign” language such as British English or a foreign culture such as that of the United Kingdom involved a sort of double anthropological process. We began by learning “English” but during the course of the semester came to a fascinating understanding of the interdependent “Englishes” in practice; by exploring with students the varieties of English that they use in and out of the classroom as well as the versions they will encounter—not just for the specific purposes of their majors—promotes the kind of critical thinking and cultural awareness that creates better and more complex writing styles. By also accepting differences in what is “proper” and learning that there are rules that apply in different ways, my students learned new ways of approaching English for academic purposes and created new vocabularies for writing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>And, as listening is a skill that students need to practice in the ESL classroom, I was attempting to give them instruction in something that they do not much practice.

<sup>2</sup>See also Ulla Connor's historical overview in her 1996 text, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Moreover, when their parents have to deal with medical providers, they often "serv[e] their parents as translator for interactions with authorities." This phenomenon has been observed in numerous studies and Leki, Cumming, and Silva cite several others (2008, p. 20).

<sup>4</sup>The *OED* defines *chunter* as "to mutter, murmur; to grumble, find fault, complain."

<sup>5</sup>*Heeb* is the title of a cheeky and irreverent magazine for young Jews in the US.

<sup>6</sup>Indeed, students new to the US have likewise expressed shock after and even gratitude upon being told that it is no longer acceptable to call African Americans "colored."

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