ISELT-4
2016

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGLISH WRITING IN THE 'SUPER-DIVERSITY' OF MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES

Lesley Harbon
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract

In this paper I consider English writing in the context of what Vertovec calls the "super-diversity" (1024) of multilingual societies. First I discuss the characteristics of multilingual societies, and the example of Indonesia as a multilingual society with Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, many regional languages, and languages of the different discourse communities, such as the language used by socially connected young learners. Second I take up the concept of Vertovec's "super-diversity" (1024), and how it might be applied to Indonesia today. Third I discuss general notions relating to English writing, and particularly the sociocultural theory that has gained good ground in conceptualisations of how best to teach and learn languages over recent decades (Vygotsky). Finally I discuss my own practice in working with university students' writing through examples of two particular cases. Salient aspects of my work with these two students are shared in the hope of illuminating strategies which may be useful for teachers of English writing in Indonesia.

Keywords: *English writing, super-diversity, multilingual societies, sociocultural theory, ELT*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I consider English writing in light of Vertovec's "super-diversity" (1024), and discuss firstly the characteristics of multilingual societies. I provide Indonesia as an example of a multilingual society: its national language, *Bahasa Indonesia,* its many regional languages, and languages of the different discourse communities, such as the language used by socially connected young learners. The concept of Vertovec's "super-diversity" (1024) is discussed, especially as regards how it might be applied to Indonesia today. General key notions relating to English writing issues are outlined, particularly the sociocultural theory that has advanced scholars' conceptualisations of how best to teach and learn languages (Vygotsky). Thereafter I discuss my own practice in working with higher degree research university students' writing through examples of two particular cases. My reflections about what key issues these two students are facing provide a focus for my discussion about the types of strategies which may be worth considering by English teachers in Indonesia who face the same issues.

Contemporary classroom contexts in the west and in many developing countries can perhaps be characterised by the term 'super-diversity', a term initially used to describe diversity in Britain's more recent "emergent demographic and social patterns… [where] an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants… have arrived over the last decade" (Vertovec 1024).If school and university classrooms can be considered versions of wider society on a micro-scale, then those notions of super-diversity – emergent demographics, social patterns, multiple-origin, transnationally connected – are equally able to be applied.

One such multilingual society is Australia. The 'super-diversity' of the Australian context includes the fact that Australian English is "the official language of the country and spoken as a first language by 90% of the population with regional and social variation" (Austin 580). There are also indigenous languages, Aboriginal English, pidgins and creoles and community languages (Austin). Australian school and university classrooms may thus be considered as super-diverse, with the student cohort of the 22-plus million inhabitants speaking any mix of the 400 different languages, including indigenous languages.

Indonesia is "…a diverse society in terms of people and culture" (Erb, Sulisyanto and Faucher 3), with a population in 2009 of 230 million (Hellwig and Tagliacozzo 1) and possessing 726 of the world's languages

(Romaine 584). The national language, Bahasa Indonesia is "a variety of Malay" (Clayton 432) and is the basis of government policy, societal communication and school and university curriculum, except where policy allows the teaching and learning of "different local or regional languages such as Batak or Javanese" (Clayton 432). In 2006, English in Indonesia was classified as an English of the expanding circle of world Englishes (Kachru 196), alongside China and Thailand. It is 'guesstimated' that of Indonesia's total population of more than 230 million people, approximately 12 million (or 5%) of the population are L1/L2 English users (Kachru 197). Figure 1, the map of ethnic groups in Indonesia "from Sabang to Merauke" (Hellwig and Tagliocozzo 4), displays the exact nature of the 'super-diversity' of the Indonesian context.

Figure 1: Ethnic groups in Indonesia
Source: Based on 'Peta Suku Bangsa di Indonesia' (Ethnic Group Map) in Ethnography Room, National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta.

A multilingual society like Indonesia faces a multitude of challenges as regards languages policy and languages in education.

2. REVIEW OF WIDER LITERATURE
English in the scholarly literature

A glance through the Index of the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Brown) shows the extent of the themes in the scholarly work published about English. English writing is the focus of discussion, from anything such as 'plain English writing', 'academic English writing', 'medical writing', through to wider literature which touches on writing, such as 'variation in non-native varieties of English writing', 'language for specific purposes', 'world Englishes', 'genre approach', 'spelling', 'formal grammar' and many more. As well, there have been millions of books written on topics as various as 'women's writing in English', 'advanced English writing', 'plain English writing', 'composition writing in English', 'English for research purposes', 'business writing in English', 'science writing', 'English writing skills', and the list continues. "English continues to be the chief lingua-franca of the Internet" (Crystal 117), and higher education systems around the world place a great deal of emphasis on knowledge published and influenced by English.

Multilingual societies

In describing multilingual societies in today's globalised world, Romaine states "bilingualism and multilingualism are a normal and unremarkable necessity of everyday life for the majority of the world's population" (584). The very characteristics of multilingual societies bring inherent challenges: "the varied cultural and linguistic existing in contemporary societies around the globe pose complex challenges for policy makers in many areas" (Romaine 584). All aspects of life are shaped and impacted by language, and

the complexity multiplies when people possess more than one language. Yet for various reasons, people are usually at different proficiency levels in their various languages. Often there is a need to receive more instruction in the second language, especially in writing skills. Teachers need therefore to be up-to-date with the best strategies for teaching foreign and second languages.

Teaching academic writing

According to Paltridge, Harbon, Hirsh, Shen, Stevenson, Phakiti and Woodrow (ix-xi), English teachers/lecturers need to know about the nature of academic English writing, about needs and situation analyses, about the different approaches to teaching academic writing (such as the process approach, the content-based approach, the genre approach to name a few), about the importance of vocabulary, about the importance of an intercultural perspective, and about assessing English writing, including feedback strategies.

There are clearly so many considerations for English writing in an academic context. Users of English in Indonesia will need to write a variety of English texts in academic and non-academic settings at various points in their lives. A key message for teachers to note is that "students often have quite different writing needs, depending on the level of study and area of study they are working in or wish to study in" (Paltridge et al. 2). They say, "students often move from summarizing and describing information to questioning, judging, and recombining information, to a deliberate search for new ideas, data and explanations" (Paltridge et al. 3). Essentially, students needing to write in English need to learn the "rules of the game" of academic writing (Paltridge et al. 4), and their teachers and lecturers are thereby the ones to support them.

Sociocultural theory supporting the teaching of English writing

According to Renshaw, "the sociocultural perspective suggests that learning is a process of appropriating 'tools for thinking' that are made available by social agents who initially act as interpreters and guides in the individual's … apprenticeship" (2). This definition refers to the notion that learning is mediated (Vygotsky), indicating a significant other individual assists in scaffolding learning. Believing in social constructivist principles, Beck and Kosnik follow the school of thought that learners learn best when working in, and supported by, social groupings, maintaining that teachers can 'scaffold' student learning.

Considering the context of students of English language in multilingual Indonesia who need to improve their writing skills, it is not unusual then to focus on what the English teacher/lecturer might best suggest, and what strategies they might advise for the student's writing improvement. The English language writing teacher can be the social agent – the significant other – who can assist the often anxious student. Outlined below is my own recent experience of being the scaffolder for the work of two postgraduate students in a university context.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Thesedays postgraduate research degree supervision is considered a teaching activity, rather than a research activity, in an academic staff member's workload in Australian higher education institutions. It is considered teaching because the activity involved is a type of research 'training'. In the process of regular introspective, reflective evaluation of my higher degree research teaching, considered as "a concept of importance for the development of teacher professionalism" by Erlandson (661), I took the following steps to journal my thoughts after recently experiencing critical incidents in the supervision of two higher degree research students. I am certainly committed to the notion that teachers "use conscious reflection as a means of understanding the relationship between their own thoughts and actions", as stated by Farrell (23), and thus track my professional supervision activity in this way by making notes subsequent to a supervision meeting with my students.

Usually, and depending on which stage the student is at, I meet my research students on a two-weekly basis. Two weeks between meetings gives them an opportunity to prepare new work for me to read and critique. I require students to submit the written text to me 2 days prior to a meeting, giving me sufficient time to read and critique and prepare feedback. In March and in April I spent time reading two

postgraduate students' work: Georgia submitting an essay for the coursework section of her Masters degree, and Sunil writing up the chapter drafts for his Masters dissertation. After my meetings, I wrote notes about the student, including comments about their writing. My notes are running records and quick comments that allow me to recall where I left off with my last feedback, and for follow-up should I need to consult others to assist me with different aspects of supervision.

First the reflective journal notes are condensed data into categories based on valid inference and interpretation. Such data analysis, according to Mackey and Gass, has the goal of seeing whether the "research findings… emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes within the raw data" (179). This is a "directed" inductive process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) where the coding follows the known theories. Trends and themes are then distilled from the reduced data.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data presented and discussed below are my reflective journal entries after working with two research higher degree students, one local and one from overseas. Pseudonyms are used, Georgia and Sunil are not the students' real names. The raw data (reflective journal notes) are all stored in my secure files on my personal computer. My comments reproduced below were all compiled in 2016.

Case #1: Georgia

I note two particular findings about Georgia's writing: (i) a difficulty in starting to write, and (ii) the usefulness of writing in chunks of text. Those two notions are explored below.

Georgia, like many young adult students enrolled in higher education degrees throughout the world, is a product of a schooling system where learning is mediated (Vygotsky), indicating a significant other individual assists in scaffolding learning. As she has moved through her undergraduate degree into her postgraduate study, Georgia has faced new understandings of both content (what she needs to learn) and process (how she needs to learn new information, and how she needs to demonstrate this learning). Yet I note that Georgia "*does not seem to be able to plan her work by herself. She seems to need me to be able to feel confident about making a plan and getting on with the task."* Perhaps today's students are not comfortable to work alone, and need the help provided by a significant other.

I wrote in my journal:

> *It seemingly helps Georgia to talk things through with me. She knows what she wants to get across, but she really seems to struggle with starting her writing off. When I mentioned that to her, she told me that it's like abseiling – being really anxious about jumping over the edge of the cliff, but once over the first bit, she can start to manage what follows a lot more easily.*

It was exactly as I recorded it – once I started her writing, she took over and confidently made progress. For Georgia, breaking the task down into little sections appears to make it easier for her. I reflected:

> *Going through the essay task and pulling key words out of it and turning them into action points in the essay seems a perfect strategy for her. So, when the essay instruction said, "present a critically engaged argument for your decisions and approaches", she knew that she had to show in her essay a) what decisions and approaches she took and b) a critically engaged argument for each of those. So it was just rewording it really, to make her understand what she had to do. It was then her choice to write about 3 decisions/approaches, and then for each of those, present an argument for those with the support of academic literature.*

Perhaps still not confident and even fearful of presuming she understood the requirements of the writing task, I told her how to look for signposts in the instructions, and plan to address each signpost, linking them all together to construct a coherent argument. Georgia's problems may be faced by some but not all students who are required to write in English. Other problems can be seen in the case of another student, Sunil.

Case #2: Sunil

I note two particular aspects ofSunil's writing and discuss them through my journal reflections: (i) the complexity of his writing style, and (ii) the particular problems he has with English prepositions and pronouns. Those two notions are explored below.

After reading two draft versions of his dissertation chapter, my thoughts on Sunil's writing include the following comments:

Sunil's style of writing is highly complex. He seems to take for granted that the target audience/reader are academics and they supposedly understand technical terms in his writing. He needs to simplify his writing at sentence level. After my first meeting with him on the first draft, he told me the way English is taught to adult EFL learners in his country: that they are given 'big words' and 'complex grammar' to indicate a high proficiency. Now after the second meeting he has told me that he needs to 'express' instead of 'impress', thus making the finished produce less complex. His long dependent clauses were encumbering his ability to convey a clear thought. I told him he really had to work on his prepositions and pronouns too.

Sunil came to this point in his professional development knowing quite a lot about English, and quite a lot about English writing. However, I believe he was being encumbered by some rules he had picked up. I believe Sunil has gone through a process, with my guidance, of needing to 'unlearn' some of what he had first learned about English writing. Sometimes, he has now learned, and depending on the writing genre, it is more important to simplify sentences and paragraphs. As well, he has learned that the wrong use of a preposition or pronoun (which can be excused in a verbal interchange because the interlocutor has more than just written textual clues and can rely on paralinguistics to make meaning), can totally distort meaning and confuse the reader. Sunil knows now to take great care with his lists of prepositions and pronouns, to double check the correct options.

Essentially for students in their secondary school years or perhaps in their university studies, we have a situation where:

- the students are learning to write in English in a context where a curriculum has been written for them by education authorities who may or might not be familiar with the student cohort and their disparate needs and experience
- the classroom materials for teaching and learning English writing may or may not be useful
- the teachers/lecturers themselves, native speaker and/or non-native speaker teachers, will be at different abilities in English writing competencies themselves, and
- the students may face situations where they need to "unlearn" English writing skills, as well as "learn" new ones.

If all of those impacting factors are present, then the students like Georgia and Sunil need help with their writing. What often results in much later years is young professionals who need to be able to write in English, wishing they had developed and focussed their English skills in earlier years. It is almost like authorities should run courses entitled, English for Wise Students, where an amount of 'early wisdom' guides students into knowing what they will need to know later on.

Georgia is now coming to realise that example texts can provide her entry points to launch into her writing, and assist her to dispel any fear she has of beginning to write, to put her first ideas into structured text. As a part of the task of beginning her writing, Georgia has also learned that academic contexts are replete with structured statements of what writing is required. Georgia needs to learn how to look for those signposts – those structured statements – then plan carefully to take each one and frame the chunks of her writing in that structured way.

Sunil needed to address the fact that he could unlearn the compulsion he felt to write complex paragraphs. Sunil needed to re-learn that his English writing is just the production part of language use: he does well to remember now that there is the receptive aspect of reading, where his supervisor (and later examiner) needs to receive and decode the message he wishes to deliver. As his supervisor, I felt obliged to let Sunil know what was important for me, reading his writing. If he could consider the reader of his writing, he could plan to simplify his sentence and paragraph structure, and focus on how the use of a particular preposition or pronoun can be crucial in delivering his message.

5. CONCLUSION

The four notions I now present in my conclusion show my desire to close with useful points for English teachers to consider in their teaching of English writing. From a closer examination of what issues

existed to block Georgia and Sunil's writing progress, the following statements may be valid for a good number of students:

- English writers need to learn how to project their thinking about their writing into the minds of those who will read their work. A simple question might be: If I was reading this, what would I want to see written?
- English writers need to learn how to decode the signposts provided which guide their planning to write. Simply, a question to guide them is: What is in the list of tasks I must undertake to write this task?
- English writers should be guided to write firstly at a very simple level. Layers of complexity can always be added. A guiding question here might be: Do I know what I am writing, and why I am writing it - at every point?
- English writers need to know that the sometimes daunting starting point of their writing task does not need to be a fearful thing. As they make "notes to self", students might reflect: I know I can produce drafts of my writing, so I should feel less anxious as I begin to write now.

Keeping good humour about students' English writing is probably the most important aspect for both English teachers/lecturers and students of English. Adding an amount of light-hearted humour might ease students' anxiety to an extent, and there are plenty of memes on social media to assist here. We can never go wrong with, for example,Keep Calm and Start Writing!

REFERENCES

Austin, P.K. "Australia: Language situation." *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Keith Brown. New York: Elsevier. 2006. 580 – 585. Print.

Beck, Clive and Kosnik, Claire. *Innovations in teacher education: A social constructivist approach.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 2006. Print.

Brutt-Griffler, J. "Languages of wider communication." *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Keith Brown. New York: Elsevier. 2006. 690 – 697. Print.

Clayton, T. "Language education policies in Southeast Asia." *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics.* 2nd ed. Ed. Keith Brown. New York: Elsevier. 2006. 430 – 432. Print.

Crystal, David. *English as a global language.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003. Print.

Erb, Maribeth, Sulistiyanto, Priyambudi, and Faucher, Carole. *Regionalism in post-Suharto Indonesia*. New York: Routledge Curzon. 2005. Print.

Erlandson, Peter. "The body disciplined: Rewriting teaching competence and the doctrine of reflection." *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 39.4 (2005): 661 – 670. Print.

Farrell, Thomas S.C."Tailoring reflection to individual needs: a TESOL case study."*Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 27.1 (2001): 23 – 38.Print.

Hellwig, Tineke. and Tagliacozzo, Eric. *The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. London: Duke University Press. 2009. Print.

Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang,and Shannon, Sarah E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research* 15.9 (2005: 1277-1288. Print.

Kachru, B. "English: World Englishes." *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Keith Brown. New York: Elsevier. 2006. 195 – 202. Print.

Liao, Hui-Chuan. "Enhancing the grammatical accuracy of EFL writing by using an AWE-assisted process approach." *System (article in press)* (2016): 1 – 16. Web. 20 April 2016.

Mackey, Alison, and Gass, Susan M.*Second language research: Methodology and design*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 2005. Print.

Paltridge, Brian., Harbon, Lesley., Hirsh, David., Shen, Huizhong., Stevenson, Marie., Phakiti, Aek., and Woodrow, Lindy., *Teaching academic writing: An introduction for teachers of second language writers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2009. Print.

Renshaw, Peter D. "The sociocultural theory of teaching and learning: Implications for the curriculum in the Australian context." *Australian Association of Research in Education 22nd Annual Conference*. Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria. November, 1992. Web.

Romaine, S. "Language policy in multilingual educational contexts." *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Keith Brown. New York: Elsevier. 2006. 584 – 596. Print.

Simeon, Jemma. "Learner writing strategies of Seychellois ESL (English as a second language) secondary school students: A sociocultural theory perspective." *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 8 (2016): 1 – 11. Web. 20 April 2016.

Vertovec, Steven. "Super-diversity and its implications." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30.6. (2007). 1024 – 1054. Print.

Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich. *Mind in society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1978. Print.