

Multilingual Writers in College Contexts

Sara P. Alvarez

In today's global and digital contexts, individuals often have to negotiate a variety of possible and competing languages, cultural knowledges, and digital settings to construct and exchange meaning (Horner, Selfe, & Lockridge, 2015). At the same time, the practice of writing has become a ubiquitous and demanded literacy in most professional spaces. People often have to write emails, social media posts, and/or reports as part of their academic and professional engagements. It is because of this growing need for multilingual communication and writing that multilingual writers are now at the center of growing scholarly discussions between the intersections of bi/multilingualism and writing for academic contexts.

In this column, I focus on multilingual writers in college contexts, specifically in college writing courses. I first examine how writing has gained a new status as a form of mass literacy and how this new status directly intersects a growing body of college students: multilingual students. I then critically interrogate how multilingual writers have been constructed in writing scholarship as writers in need of language. Finally, I advocate for pedagogical practices that seek to cultivate and sustain the value, range, and richness of multilingual students' language and literacy practices as they work to defy monolingualist ideologies.

Writing as Mass Literacy

Examining the role that writing, as a form of mass literacy, plays in today's world allows us to gain a stronger sense as to why writing has obtained a dominant status in the college context. Additionally, reviewing how writing functions beyond the college context can help us unveil how it remains a fluid and emergent practice, highly informed and shaped by its variety of users.

In *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*, Brandt (2015) presented her findings from a seven-year qualitative study that involved in-depth interviews with 90 people ranging from 15 to 80 years old and mainly working in professional and technical spaces. Brandt posed writing

as a new form of mass literacy, by which reading from a writer's perspective (as it pertains to professional spaces) has become a synergetic tool to develop more writing because writing is in high demand in most sites of work.

Yet, Brandt went further, addressing what this transformative definition for writing, and its relation to reading, specifically means to the youths in her study. She explained that youths in her study demonstrated an innovative take on, and practice of, writing. Brandt explained that youths

did not read *like* writers. They read *as* writers. So when they read they attended not merely and not always to micro-level, sentence-level craft technique (a matter inordinately emphasized in writing instruction and guidebooks) but rather to larger spheres of social interaction, craft membership, aspiration, and ambition. (p. 126)

No place is more familiar with the demand and production of writing than the college context, where students are often expected to take not only the long-established first-year composition course (Brereton, 1995; Strickland, 2011) but also writing courses designed to introduce and guide disciplinary knowledge production, such as science writing, business writing, and academic writing in the humanities. Yet, what does writing, as mass literacy, mean to the growing body of college students broadly characterized as multilingual? Specifically, how can we leverage multilingual writers' language and literacy practices in the university amid this new form of writing concerned with "larger spheres of social interaction"?

A New Term: *Multilingual Writers*

The answers to the previous questions have large implications for how we may conceive of academic writing,

SARA P. ALVAREZ is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Queens College, City University of New York, Flushing, NY, USA; email sara.alvarez@qc.cuny.edu.

which is generally assumed to be standardized writing generated and produced for college-like settings (cf. Canagarajah, 2002; Wolsey, Lapp, & Fisher, 2012). More importantly, however, our answers directly impact students who are broadly viewed as multilingual. For this reason, it is important to trace how the term *multilingual* has become widely applied to a specific body of students. This analysis offers us perspective on how this term both participates in and attempts to tackle dominant language ideologies in college contexts. For the purpose of this column, I draw on the term *multilingual* not only because of its umbrella status, which I subsequently discuss, but also for its desire to recognize that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring rich literacies to the classroom beyond English.

In the last 15 years, the term *multilingual students* has gathered significant traction in the college context. Such a shift is noticeable not only in scholarship but also in everyday discourse referencing particular student populations. In “Multilingual/ism,” Tardy (2015) argued that although the ideology of labeling students multilingual could be noted in college-level writing scholarship as early as the 1990s, it was not until the mid-2000s that the term became widely employed. She also noted that it was works like Spack’s (1997) article “The Rhetorical Construction of Multilingual Students” and Canagarajah’s (2002) *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students* that fostered the significant shift.

Thereafter, *multilingual writer* has become a rather large umbrella term for a body of students contributing a diverse range of writing perspectives, practices, and expectations to the writing classroom. For instance, students who, through systematic and racializing educational bureaucracies, have become codified as English as a second language (ESL), international, long-term English learners, second-language writers, or basic writers (N. Flores, Kleyn, & Menken, 2015; Friedrich, 2006; Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010) are now generally referred to as multilingual in the college context.

Critically Reviewing the Term *Multilingual Writer* in the College Context

Like the term *second-language writer*, *multilingual* asks that educators adopt an additive perspective on bilingualism in thinking of students. This additive perspective aligns with monolingualist ideology, as it views a person’s bilingual language practices as dissociated and individually located based on *a* language and *a* setting (García & Kleifgen, 2010). For example, this perspective

may deem a U.S.-born Latina as someone whose first language is Spanish and whose academic writing literacies can only be sustained through English (as monolithically envisioned). For this reason, this perspective often fails to challenge how language and literacy practices are emergent and specifically navigated from the perspectives of bi/multilinguals (García & Wei, 2014).

In this way, multilingual writers in college contexts continue to face the detriment of long-held English-only ideologies, which view writing pluralism and difference as an error to penalize and fix (Horner & Kopelson, 2014). Additionally, because in the U.S. college context multilingual writers represent a diverse group of local and transnational individuals (in their majority, people of color), they often encounter academic structures of power that prescribe particular links of academic value based on racialization.

Multilingual writers are then often framed as unique and in need of language, specifically an ideologized form of academic English that does not change, as language does. In this way, their writing is often subjected to a hypersurveillance of difference, informed by dominant monolingual ideologies of what counts as different or appropriate to the writing classroom (Baker-Bell, 2017; N. Flores & Rosa, 2015).

A Transformational Vision of Multilingual Writers

Contemporary understandings of bilingualism have shown us that bi/multilingual practice is an intricate and dynamic process by which all individuals can—and do—negotiate language and academic literacy practices (Bou Ayash, 2016; You, 2016). For this reason, scholars in writing and literacy studies have forwarded important calls to rethink our teaching of writing in ways that seek to understand how these practices advance and sustain rhetorical and cultural knowledges (Cushman, 2016; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2014).

What Educators Know: Multilingual Writers Engage and Perform Complex Academic Writing Practices

Current scholarship continues to show us that multilingual writers can do the following:

- Negotiate and translate language and meaning-making practices on an everyday basis and in ways that are critical and culturally situated. For instance, as Guerra (2016) illustrated, multilingual young adults continuously navigate complex linguistic settings

and texts, and they can greatly benefit from becoming more attuned to how these practices advance their academic writing (Lorimer Leonard, 2014).

- Contest, remix, and advance academic and professional writing practices by continuously challenging our understanding of writing, bilingualism, and language in communication. For example, as Gonzales (2015) and Wight (2017) demonstrated, multilingual students offer innovative and access-oriented solutions to seemingly solid conventions of communication, specifically in high-stakes writing.
- Sustain and foster transnational literacies and networks via various forms of writing that are of value to the academy (Alvarez & Alvarez, in press). For example, as Wang (2017) brilliantly showed in her work with Chinese international students and their college-based transnational networks, multilingual students foster academic practices and social engagements through their deliberate mediations of apps such as WeChat.

What Educators Can Do: Take a Stance

There is so much more that we can do—and educators are already doing—in the college writing classroom, which is of benefit to all students but takes an important stance toward equity and social justice for multilingual writers in the college context:

- Interrogate English and academic writing. How do we understand these to be connected, evaluated, and transferred (Martínez, 2010; Wolsey et al., 2012)? For example, ask students to write about the etymology of words they conceive as academic. What surprises them about their findings?
- Model and invite students to dissect the trajectories and histories of texts that may be read as academic and/or in English only. Text trajectories and histories can function as a telling case for how bilingual productions often face erasure because of monolingualist views of language (Alvarez, Canagarajah, Lee, Lee, & Rabbi, 2017; Peters, 2013). For example, design a writing assignment in which students write about a piece they wrote before. Raise questions such as these: Who helped you develop this piece? What languages do you recall being involved in your development of this piece?
- Ask students to write about their language and writing experiences. This can guide students to critically reflect on the writing they are already producing and

for what purpose. This is also an opportunity to rhetorically analyze how academic genres and languages are flexible and benefit from a plurality of voices. For example, as Brooks (2017) insightfully demonstrated, asking students to share more on their language and writing practices in and outside of school settings can yield many answers about their writing histories and expertise that move beyond institutionalized categorizations.

New Writing Demands Multilingual Writers

As works such as those of T.T. Flores (2018), Martínez (2010), and Wang (2017) have shown, multilingual writers meet and exceed the demands of the new form of writing that Brandt (2015) highlighted in her work. Multilingual writers are, as they always have been, making significant contributions to the rise of writing—as a mass literacy. More simply put, cultural and linguistic pluralism is a crucial and critical necessity for academic writing.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez, S.P., & Alvarez, S. (in press). Transnational and transmodal community alliances: Southern Latinx students' digital and culturally sustaining practices. In V. del Hierro, I. Baca, & L. Gonzales (Eds.), *Community action for social change: A digital archive*. Anderson, SC: Parlor.
- Alvarez, S.P., Canagarajah, S., Lee, E., Lee, J.W., & Rabbi, S. (2017). Translingual practice, ethnic identities, and voice in writing. In B. Horner & L. Tetreault (Eds.), *Crossing divides: Exploring translingual writing pedagogies and programs* (pp. 31–47). Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2017). "I can switch my language, but I cannot switch my skin": What teachers must understand about the relationship between black language and race. In E. Moore Jr., A. Michael, & M.W. Penick-Parks (Eds.), *The guide for white women who teach black boys* (pp. 97–107). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Bou Ayash, N. (2016). Conditions of (im)possibility: Postmonolingual language representations in academic literacies. *College English*, 78(6), 555–577.
- Brandt, D. (2015). *The rise of writing: Redefining mass literacy*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Brereton, J.C. (Ed.) (1995). *The origins of composition studies in the American college, 1875–1925*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Brooks, D.M. (2017). How and when did you learn your languages? Bilingual students' linguistic experiences and literacy instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 60(4), 383–393. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.573>
- Canagarajah, A.S. (2002). *Critical academic writing and multilingual students*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Cushman, E. (2016). Translingual and decolonial approaches to meaning making. *College English*, 78(3), 234–242.
- Flores, N., Kleyn, T., & Menken, K. (2015). Looking holistically in a climate of partiality: Identities of students labeled

- long-term English language learners. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 14(2), 113–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2015.1019787>
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>
- Flores, T.T. (2018). Breaking silence and amplifying voices: Youths writing and performing their worlds. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 61(6), 653–661. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.733>
- Friedrich, P. (2006). Assessing the needs of linguistically diverse first-year students: Bringing together and telling apart international ESL, resident ESL and monolingual basic writers. *Writing Program Administration*, 30(1), 15–35.
- García, O., & Kleifgen, J. (2010). *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English language learners*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gonzales, L. (2015). Multimodality, translanguaging, and rhetorical genre studies. *Composition Forum*, 31. Retrieved from <http://compositionforum.com/issue/31/multimodality.php>
- Guerra, J. (2016). Cultivating a rhetorical sensibility in the translanguaging writing classroom. *College English*, 78(3), 228–233.
- Horner, B., & Kopelson, K. (Eds.) (2014). *Reworking English in rhetoric and composition: Global interrogations, local interventions*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Horner, B., Lu, M., Royster, J.J., & Trimbur, J. (2011). Language difference in writing: Toward a translanguaging approach. *College English*, 73(3), 303–321.
- Horner, B., Selfe, C., & Lockridge, T. (2015). Translinguality, transmodality, and difference: Exploring dispositions and change in language and learning. *Intermezzo*. Retrieved from <http://intermezzo.enculturation.net/01/ttd-horner-selfe-lockridge/index.htm>
- Lorimer Leonard, R. (2014). Multilingual writing as rhetorical attunement. *College English*, 76(3), 227–247.
- Martinez, R.A. (2010). “Spanglish” as literacy tool: Toward an understanding of the potential role of Spanish-English code-switching in the development of academic literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45(2), 124–149.
- Otte, G., & Mlynarczyk, R.W. (2010). The future of basic writing. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 29(1), 5–32.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H.S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77>
- Peters, J. (2013). “Speak white”: Language policy, immigration discourse, and tactical authenticity in a French enclave in New England. *College English*, 75(6), 563–581.
- Spack, R. (1997). The rhetorical construction of multilingual students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(4), 765–774. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587759>
- Strickland, D. (2011). *The managerial unconscious: In the history of composition studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University.
- Tardy, C.M. (2015). Multilingual/ism. In P. Heilker & P. Vanderberg (Eds.), *Keywords in writing studies* (pp. 114–119). Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Wang, X. (2017). Transnational Chinese students’ literacy and networking practices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 60(6), 687–696. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.623>
- Wight, S. (2017). Admitted or denied: Multilingual writers negotiate admissions essays. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 61(2), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.667>
- Wolsey, T.D., Lapp, D., & Fisher, D. (2012). Students’ and teachers’ perceptions: An inquiry into academic writing. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(8), 714–724. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.00086>
- You, X. (2016). *Cosmopolitan English and transliteracy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

The department editors welcome reader comments.



MANEKA DEANNA BROOKS is an assistant professor of reading education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas State University, San Marcos, USA; email maneka@txstate.edu.



KATHERINE K. FRANKEL is an assistant professor of literacy education in the Wheelock College of Education & Human Development at Boston University, MA, USA; email kfrankel@bu.edu.