

## Abstract

Research on second language writing instruction consistently shows low levels of student engagement (Lee, 2012) in writing classes. In order to address this challenge, researchers have argued for the need to introduce various forms of expressive writing (Bilton & Sivasubramaniam, 2009), including student interpretive practice with texts (Kramersch, 1997). Another common problem associated with second language writing instruction is lack of connection between writing and reading activities. Prominent language educators have long recognized the benefits of connecting reading and writing activities with English learners (Krashen, 1992). According to Krashen (1992), we learn to write through reading. To resolve these multiple discrepancies, I engage students in a second language writing course with narratives written by multilingual authors (e.g., Tan, 2006) as "springboards" for in-class discussions and reading-response journals addressing the issues related to identity, language, and a feeling of belonging. The majority of the students find this classroom practice inspiring, instructive, and engaging. As a result of their participation, students also increase their knowledge of U.S. culture and cross-cultural awareness. The paper includes materials that teachers can use in their own English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

*Keywords:* writing, ESL in higher education, international students

Using multilingual literature to enhance multilingual students' experiences in second language writing classes: An innovative classroom practice

[Student end-of-semester survey] *I'm not sure but maybe I can write a multilingual story about my life as an international student in the future, too. That would be interesting to add my voice to this literature. One more story like that.*

As a faculty member at a U.S. intensive English program, I have noted that the majority of the students enrolled in my advanced-level writing courses demonstrate low levels of engagement with class activities and homework assignments. In fact, end-of-semester evaluations show that students are not interested in taking a writing course from the start. For instance, for the spring 2014 and fall 2014 semesters, the motivation scores were 3 and 2.8, respectively, on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 as the highest value.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the assignments utilizing literary texts by multilingual authors (e.g., Tan, 2006)<sup>2</sup> were implemented in an advanced-level academic writing course in an attempt to increase student motivation to write during the spring 2015 semester. I was interested in seeing whether the texts written by successful bilinguals can encourage second language students in becoming better writers. Through guided interactions with texts students can also be expected to improve their writing proficiency. Overall, the article describes an innovative classroom practice and focuses on the contents of students' reading-response journals and reactions collected through an end-of-semester survey.

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<sup>1</sup> An institutional survey is distributed to students at the end of each semester. The survey item addressing student motivation to enroll in a particular course is formulated as follows: "I really wanted to take this course regardless of who taught it."

<sup>2</sup> The 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan focuses on the lives of four Chinese-American immigrant families. It examines relationships between mothers and daughters and reflects on the connections and gaps in the two cultures (Chinese and American).

## **Literature review**

This classroom practice is based on the ideas of prominent language educators (e.g., Krashen, 1992) arguing for the need to connect writing and reading activities for second language learners. While intensive English programs generally teach academic reading and writing skills in two separate courses, this paper points to the ways in which these skills can be taught interdependently. Through guided interactions with texts, students improve their writing proficiency (Lee, 2012), learn to make personal connections to the literature they read (Vyas, 2004), and use writing to organize ideas when interacting with texts (Cohen, 2007). The texts by multilingual writers also allow to introduce a cultural component in second language instruction (Kramsch, 1997). In particular, these texts can encourage students to discuss certain discontinuities between their home vs. the U.S. cultures and assist students in resolving any tensions that may arise (Vandrick, 1997; Vyas, 2004).

## **Procedures**

Students in my advanced-level writing course were offered a set of texts and writing prompts dealing with the issues of identity, language, and a feeling of belonging (see Appendix A). The texts also served as “springboards” for in-class discussions. Students’ reading-response journals and reactions to this assignment in the end-of-semester survey were collected and analyzed.

## **Results**

Students’ reactions in the end-of-semester survey pertaining to the use of multilingual narratives were predominantly positive. Some students were motivated to write in their second language due to the use of these activities. For example, one student wrote: “I’d rather write these than the regular essays.” Another student was interested to write a multilingual story about

her life as an international student in the future. Other students found the use of this assignments helpful to engage them in in-class discussions because they could “share similar experiences.” Some other student noted: “I recommend them [multilingual narratives] because they will give good advice. If you know there are many people who have troubles, you will not feel alone.” Furthermore, most of the students were enthusiastic about using the same set of writing exercises and texts with future students (see Table 1).

Table 1.

*End-of-semester Survey*

<i>Use of multilingual narratives...</i>	<i>increased your knowledge of U.S. culture</i>	<i>increased your cross-cultural awareness</i>	<i>would be recommended with prospective students</i>
<i>Yes</i>	3*	7	7
<i>No</i>	7	3	3

\*The numbers correspond to the numbers of students who responded. The class consisted of 10 students total.

To summarize, most students enjoyed both reading and writing these stories. The students also appeared to be more engaged during in-class discussions.

In addition, the texts and students’ written responses to the multilingual narratives helped the students to gain some insights into the U.S. culture such as acquiring greater awareness relating to the tensions plaguing the U.S. society. For example, students learned about certain linguistic biases that exist in today’s U.S. society, as the following excerpt from a reading-response journal to Stavans (2003)<sup>3</sup> demonstrates:

Excerpt 1. Moreover, I am not a native English speaker and I sometimes feel ashamed when I mispronounce English. I am pleased Spanish speakers are not

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<sup>3</sup> In my “Love-affair with Spanglish”, the author traces the history of Spanglish in the U.S. and people’s changing attitudes towards it.

looked down anymore (according to the chapter). I think we have to accept the changing of the language, not reject.

Finally, students developed greater cross-cultural awareness. A student, referring to the assignment utilizing an excerpt from Tan (2006), admitted: “I got to know that it is not easy to communicate if you have a relationship (boyfriend/girlfriend) with other cultures; it may occur that they have lots of problems and lack of understanding.”

### **Reflections**

Overall, the paper suggests that writing assignments utilizing texts by multilingual authors can serve as an important mediational tool that can foster greater motivation and engagement in second language writing classes. At the same time, it is important to remember the role of the “Hawthorne effect” (Landsberger, 1958), i.e., the students’ desire to please the instructor (also, the researcher and the author of this article). Therefore, more classroom research investigating the use of multilingual literature with second language writers can be carried out.

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## Appendix A

### Texts and Writing Prompts

**Text “Various lives” by A. Desai:** The text contains a short autobiography of a female writer of Indian descent who reflects on the connections and gaps in the cultures of the various places in which she resides throughout her lifetime (e.g., India, the U.S., Mexico).

Writing Prompts:

1. How do you define “home” for yourself?
2. Do you agree with the author’s idea of travelling the world until one finds where s/he belongs? Why (not)?

**Text “Crickets” by R. O. Butler:** The text focuses on a father – son relationship in the context of their life in the U.S. The father, an immigrant from Vietnam, feels a distance from his U.S.-born son. He attempts to establish a closer relationship with his son by introducing the latter to cricket fighting, a childhood game he had enjoyed in Vietnam.

Writing Prompt:

1. Did you ever have any of the experiences described by the author? If yes, did you react in a similar or different manner? Why?

**Text “La gringuita” by J. Alvarez:** The text describes life experiences of a female protagonist of Hispanic heritage who having avoided the limitations imposed on women in her country of origin laments her loss of her native tongue, which she still speaks, but with an accent.

Writing Prompts:

1. Do/did you have any disagreements with your parents and/or relatives because of the differences in the U.S. vs. your home-country rules/norms?
2. Do you consider yourself a successful bilingual? Why (not)?

**Text “My love-affair with Spanglish” by I. Stavans:** The author traces the history of Spanglish in the U.S. and people’s changing attitudes towards it.

Writing Prompts:

1. How do you feel about speaking a language like Spanglish?
2. Do you have multiple “loves” for the languages you speak, as the author does?

Explain.

**Text “Memoirs of a bilingual daughter” by I. de Courtivron:** The text narrates life experiences of a U.S.-born female protagonist of French-American descent. The text particularly focuses on the personality of the protagonist’s mother who having gained greater financial security in the U.S. than in France still could not consider it a “home.”

Writing Prompt:

1. Did you ever feel like hiding your real identity, much like the protagonist did?

Why (not)? Explain.

**Text “Alice does not live here anymore” by C. Kinginger:** The text talks about the study-abroad experiences of a U.S. student in France and the impact of this experience on the student’s maturity.

Writing Prompt:

1. Did you ever doubt your English ability, as the protagonist did with regard to her French? Why (not)? Explain.

**Text “The joy-luck club” by Amy Tan:** The excerpt was taken from Amy Tan’s 1989 novel. The excerpt focuses on the first-time encounter of a Chinese-American family with a U.S. fiancé of the daughter.

Writing Prompts:

1. Did you ever encounter any embarrassing experiences because of the lack of knowledge of a different language/culture?
2. How can these situations be best dealt with?