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**From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow**

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## Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages? Complicating the Yes/No Debate

Peter Elbow



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## Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages? Complicating the Yes/No Debate

Janet Bean, Maryann Cucchiara,  
Robert Eddy, Peter Elbow, Rhonda Grego,  
Rich Haswell, Patricia Irvine, Eileen Kennedy,  
Ellie Kutz, Al Lehner, Paul Kei Matsuda

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what i be talking about  
can be said in this language  
only this tongue  
be the one that understands  
what i be talking about

[from "defending my tongue," Lucile Clifton]

And now my tongue's use is to me no more  
Than an unstringed viol or harp,  
Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up  
Or being open put into his hands  
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.

[from Shakespeare's *Richard III*]

Increasingly students enter our writing classrooms with a mother tongue that is not the English or standardized English in which they will be expected to produce most or all of their public and academic writing. We believe that for most writers, informal exploratory writing helps to generate ideas and leads to stronger final drafts. But is the process of writing towards a final draft in standardized English always aided most by informal writing and early drafting also in standardized English? To become accomplished writers in standardized English, must students work within at least an approximation of that variety of English throughout their composing process? Must their mother tongue be of no more use to them than "an unstringed viol" in this enterprise? Can we validate language minority students' languages and identities at the same time we help them learn the dominant variety of English? Are there contexts and circumstances under which we might encourage our students to draw on a home language or mother tongue as they generate ideas and compose early drafts?

These are questions that we sought to explore in a July 2002 symposium. The authors represent the fields of composition, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and literacy studies. We met for a week of intensive work at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and shared our research, our experiences, our thinking, and whatever other research we could find. We brought to this exploration our prior study of relevant issues in our individual research. We also brought our experiences working with linguistically diverse students in a variety of settings: teaching writing to students who speak a variety of English not dominant in the U.S. (such as African American Vernacular English), to international and immigrant students

learning English as a second language, to students in other countries learning English as a foreign language, to students in countries where most people shared a vernacular that was not widely accepted as a written language, and to mixed classes that include representatives of all these groups. We recognized different purposes in our teaching—purposes that reflected our different contexts. But we shared an interest in helping all our students to produce effective and appropriate writing in English for academic contexts and purposes. And we shared several assumptions: we see all writing as taking place within a particular social context and believe that writers are affected by the ways in which they are positioned in that context; we think that writers will feel more confident as language-users when their home language is valued and respected; and we want the writers in our classrooms to write from a position of strength and with a belief in their own competence.

In our symposium, we figured out fairly quickly that the question was not so much *whether or not* to invite students to write in a mother tongue different from standardized English—but rather this: *when and under what conditions* might it make sense to do so? Of course there are many conditions where it doesn't make sense to invite a home language. But we could see that there are at least a few limiting contexts where it probably does make sense—for example for purely private exploratory writing or for comparing the grammar or rhetoric of their home language with standardized written English. In short we seek to get away from the kind of yes/no, either/or debate that simplifies what is actually a complex matter. We saw the need to frame the question in a more empirical and human way and pay closer attention to differences—differences among classrooms, among larger contexts, among writing tasks, and among individual persons.

We have been influenced by a helpfully persistent tradition of advocacy and research on the use of home languages. For example, Paulo Freire's work with adult literacy shows us the power of using the language of lived experience. Geneva Smitherman's research shows how rhetorical features of AAVE served to improve the scores of student papers on NAEP exams. Both Smitherman and Lisa Delpit suggest the benefits for AAVE students of starting writing tasks in AAVE and then revising to the dominant variety of English. (For recent research on writing in AAVE, see Gilyard and Richardson.)

And we have a concrete, first hand reason for rejecting the claim that it *never* makes sense to invite students to write in home languages. One of the authors, Patricia Irvine, during two years of teaching at the College of the Virgin Islands, invited students in both basic and honors first-year writing classes to write some pieces in Caribbean Creole English. In this context, standardized English was very much the goal. Students in these classes did much better than other students in the remedial writing program on exit exams in standardized English (Irvine and Elsasser; Elsasser and Irvine). Of course, writing in Creole was not the only feature that led to these students' success in standardized English. The concrete conditions Irvine and Elsasser found and the practices they used were complex and situated. In short, their work didn't demonstrate that it's always good to invite writing in a home dialect of English, but it did convince us that it's not always *bad* to do so.

This paper is an account of our shared explorations and of our efforts to name some important variables or criteria that bear on the question of whether or not to invite students to write in a

home dialect or language. We offer our conclusions in the form of a list of variables to consider. As you'll see, this list won't serve as a calculus for producing neat answers for every teaching situation by checking off boxes. In a single teaching situation, one variable may dispose towards inviting a home language while another variable disposes against it; and sometimes a single criterion is ambiguous in its force (Anderson and Irvine). In short, you could summarize our essay with the simple conclusion that there are no easy answers. (So too, not every author agrees with every detail of the discussions that follow).

(1) First variable. Are we inviting students to write in a home language or in a home dialect? We often find ourselves stressing what might be called an obvious or common sense view, namely that it makes more sense to invite writing in a dialect of English than in an entirely different language:

- Students who write in a dialect of English can usually retain more words and syntactical constructions from their drafts when they revise into standardized English than from drafts in a different language. Thus dialect writers will seem better able to harness the strengths of voice as they revise into standardized English.
- Dialects of English are often more heavily stigmatized than languages other than English: native speakers of Japanese, Russian, or Khmer are unlikely to feel that there is something bad or stupid or defective about their home language—whereas these are exactly the feelings engendered in many speakers of dialects of English like AAVE, Caribbean Creole, or Hawai'i Creole English. When a dialect or language is stigmatized, student speakers are particularly likely to benefit from having it honored by the invitation to use it in writing. (More about stigmatization in a later section.)

Nevertheless, we sometimes question whether it makes sense to distinguish between writing in a home dialect and writing in a home language (or is even possible?):

- It's not easy to distinguish definitively between languages and dialects. Dialects or varieties of a language can be considered languages with distinct rules of their own (see Palacas on AAVE as a distinct language). And how "close" a dialect or language is to standardized English can depend on context.
- Stigmatization is not restricted to dialects of English. Contact varieties of languages like the Spanish widely used in New York and the Southwest are liable to be heavily stigmatized (Kells).
- There is research showing that the use of L1 by ESL and EFL students may help in fluency, organization, elaboration, and retrieval of ideas during L2 composing (see Friedlander for a review; see also Auerbach; Kobayashi and Rinnert; Woodall).
- Students can develop and experience their voice on paper in exploratory writing or first drafts, even when they use a language entirely different from English.
- The very sense of closeness that students often feel between a standardized variety English and other varieties of English can lead them to retain words or grammatical forms from their home variety drafts--without realizing that these words or forms might be inappropriate in standardized English or else mean something different from what the writer intended. (For example, Shondel Nero has pointed out that the phrase "talking to a girl" in Caribbean Creole English may imply having sex with her.) Of course similar misunderstandings can sometimes also happen between different languages, especially with English loan words that have changed their meaning in the context of other languages. (For

example, a Japanese speaker might look at a skinny person and say "he is smart" because the English loan word "smart" [smaat] has come to mean "slender" in Japanese.)

It would be useful to have more research and experimentation about the differences between writing in a home language and a home dialect.

(2) Second variable. What kind of writing is the goal? Certain kinds of writing lend themselves more readily than others to the use of a home language or dialect. For example, many teachers ask for exploratory writing that's not to be developed any further because the goal is simply to help students think about a reading or prepare for a discussion. Sometimes this writing is not intended for the eyes of others—or even discarded; sometimes it is for sharing orally in pairs or small groups or sharing with the teacher—but not for response. The goal of such writing is not to create a product but rather to help students think something through or explore their reactions—though it may be intended to lay seeds for a product. Mother tongue writing also makes more obvious sense for pieces meant to convey personal experience such as personal essays, memoir, fiction, and poetry.\* [TO THE EDITOR: WE KNOW IT'S UNCOMMON NOW, BUT COULD WE HAVE THE FOOTNOTE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE. IT'S THE ONLY ONE.]

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 \*The use of vernacular dialects in published writing usually appears first as quoted speech in fiction, memoir, and poetry. From there it spreads to narrators of whole works. ("Alice Walker's . . . subject . . . writes herself to a personal freedom and to a remarkable level of articulation in the dialect voice in which Hurston's protagonist speaks" [Gates 169].) Then it spreads more widely to nonfiction.  
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But writing in a home language or dialect makes little sense when students have no chance to revise and the piece must be in standardized English. This is common in exam situations. Also, there are many situations that call for simple informal writing that is not worth taking the trouble to revise, for example writing directions to a friend for something one understands well or writing a note to the teacher giving a straightforward reason why one must miss class.

For pieces of writing in an academic or formal register, it would also seem to make little sense to use a home language or dialect. But if an academic or formal writing task is sufficiently important to warrant extensive revising, many teachers do, in fact, routinely make use of a home dialect for the early stages. That is, there is nothing remarkable about starting off academic or formal writing tasks with freewriting. And freewriting usually involves use of a more or less oral home dialect that differs from standardized written English. Even students who grew up with the mainstream variety of English cannot be said to have standardized written English as a mother tongue. The distance between these two dialects is illustrated by the difference between freewriting and careful writing.

(3) Who is the audience? Many teachers have found it appropriate to invite students occasionally to work on pieces of writing in a home language for readers who are speakers of that language: perhaps family members, friends, or even a local employer. Teachers who make this invitation are usually seeking to increase students' ownership and investment in writing—and also trying to give them a more palpable experience of a basic principle of rhetoric: audience and purpose determine genre *and* language choice. Such writing occasions might well lead students to go on and revise and copy edit in their home language. This activity will help

them take more ownership of the copy editing process too. If a teacher doesn't know the home language or is not experienced in the home dialect, that teacher will be in the interesting and fruitful position of having less knowledge and authority about the language being used than the student has.

(4) What is the political or psychological context for an invitation to write in a home language—particularly with regard to stigmatization and identity? It can never be easy to decide whether to invite students to write in their home language. But if that home language is not stigmatized—as is usually the case for, say, Russian-, Cambodian-, or Japanese-speaking students in an English classroom (inside or outside the U.S.)—that decision, however uncertain, can be made on comparatively straightforward pragmatic linguistic and pedagogical grounds. If, in contrast, the home language is highly stigmatized, then the context becomes incredibly vexed and dangerous and a teacher's decision can only be made with enormous uncertainty and humility. We spent much of our Symposium time discussing the issue of writing in stigmatized home languages, but we end up mostly with questions to ask, not answers.

Is the home dialect or language looked down on in the larger community? Does the emphasis on standardized English tend to carry for these students the implication that their home dialect or language is bad, broken, stupid (or, as in some ESL/EFL classes, is the home language explicitly prohibited)? Does it feel to students that if they adopt English or the dominant variety of English, they are in danger of losing their present identity or becoming a different person? And how much is the very existence of their home dialect or language threatened by the dominance of standardized English? There are subtle gradations here from little or no stigmatization (as with many ESL or EFL students), to small or moderate stigmatization (as experienced by many U.S. speakers of some Southern dialects of English), to extreme stigmatization (as experienced, say, by most speakers of African American Vernacular English or Southwestern and Puerto Rican forms of Spanish).

Our already-complex discussions were further complicated by those from our group who teach in historically Black colleges or in classrooms with large proportions of AAVE students and students with other highly stigmatized languages. We started with a predisposition to assume that when a home language is stigmatized, we have all the more reason to try to build a safe place for its use. After all, how can students prosper as writers and thinkers if they can only write in a language they are liable to experience as an enemy language—a language tending to destroy their own language. Irvine and Elsasser managed to create these productive conditions, but the success of their students depended on lots of conditions that need exploring (more below); they didn't just say, "Let's write in Creole."

For on the other hand, even if an invitation to write in a mother tongue is *intended* as an invitation to an easier, freer, safer, more intimate and natural fount of language and thinking, it's not clear that speakers of stigmatized languages can necessarily *experience* the invitation this way:

- Will it really be easy and safe? Just because a first language is intimate or close, that doesn't necessarily make it easy or safe. Extreme intimacy can even make the language more dangerous to use—especially in a public setting.

- What about double consciousness? Or what if a student's private consciousness is more oriented to (say) African American language and culture and his or her public consciousness more oriented to white mainstream culture? (Some speak of the unconscious and the conscious.)
- Where does any particular individual student with a stigmatized home language (e.g. AAVE or Spanglish) find himself or herself in relation to the political and literary history of the larger group of writers and public figures using that language?
- And what if the distinction between "home language" and standardized English (a distinction that we find ourselves building on here) is not so clear cut? What about the tradition of mixing, interlanguage, hybrid discourse, code switching? Keith Gilyard's autobiography shows that code switching was a natural part of his home discourse; for some students an interlanguage or hybrid language seems to be the writing dialect that feels natural; some students grow up with many dialects or languages and can't name one as their "home" or "mother" tongue. (Anzaldúa; see Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda on "hybrid language" within "third spaces" as "zones of development" in classroom settings.)

An invitation to use a home language will be experienced differently depending on all these factors.

On top of these questions come other hard ones: how do institutional policies push standardization at the expense of diversity? How often do we as English teachers participate—even if unconsciously—in the stigmatization of home languages? (See, for example, Ball and Lardner on the persistence of negative attitudes about African American Vernacular English.) And how often does stigmatization from the outside lead students to *internalize* these attitudes and sincerely devalue or even condemn their own home language (see Lippi-Green on this phenomenon with AAVE and Kells on Southwest varieties of Spanish and Spanglish). The more we work in this area, the more we see that feelings about language tend to be deeper and more explosive than feelings about ideas.

In the end, we find ourselves trying to figure out what would be involved in constructing a *context of respect*—within a larger context of disrespect. We think we see the main elements in the rich and complicated way Irvine and Elsasser slowly and carefully invited their students in the Virgin Islands to write in Creole. The stigmatization of that language was pervasive and intense. But they got a respected linguist from the College—notably one who was a native speaker of Creole—to make a presentation to the students showing them that Creole is a full and sophisticated language, not "broken" or "defective" in any way. They also devoted important time to comparative study of the syntax and lexicon and *politics* of Creole and standardized English in the Virgin Islands. Thus, on the occasions when students wrote in Creole, they did so with a rich background of larger "meta"-understanding of how language issues play out in the culture. The honors students were hesitant at first to have their Creole writings published: their academic knowledge that Creole is a complete and valid language came in conflict with their social knowledge that they could be stigmatized for writing in it. Students learned about how Creole and other stigmatized languages come to be devalued—how the groups speaking them had lost a political struggle. Some students wrote in Creole partially as resistance to linguistic domination.

And what about *mixed* classrooms? Irvine and Elsasser's Caribbean students were all native speakers of the Creole, but mixed classrooms are probably more common in the U.S. When speakers of nondominant versions of English or non-English languages are in the minority (especially if the languages are stigmatized), they are liable to feel unsafe using their home language. Yet on the other hand, many classrooms look and sound more uniformly mainstream than they actually are: Students whose language does not mark them as different from their mainstream classmates may in fact have grown up with dialects or languages that are different—often stigmatized. Such students are often grateful to explore the issue of writing in a mother tongue. (On the issue of mixed classrooms, see Matsuda and Silva.)

Ellie Kutz, another author, describes a different path to a culture of respect. She shows how we can invite students themselves to explore the different discourse contexts in which they participate, and to bring their home languages and dialects into the English writing classroom as part of their study (Kutz). Such work allows all learners to recognize the discourse competence they use when speaking for familiar purposes in familiar communities and to gain a meta-level sense of how insiders to any setting develop ways of communicating that are appropriate to its shared purposes. There is also some evidence that if we help second language writers focus more on how they move into new discourse contexts, they can apply to their writing more effective discourse-level strategies (such as how to place themselves within a conversation) rather than applying only limited language-learning strategies (such as how to fix lexical and syntactic errors). While such work invites students to write *about*, rather than *in* their home languages and dialects, it can also make space for students to reflect on how their work in a new discourse can benefit from drawing on the resources of home language or dialect.

(5) What is the learning goal for writing on this particular occasion: practicing for *future* fluency in standardized English or drafting for a *present* text in standardized English that captures the student's richest thinking and strongest voice? A teacher who takes future fluency as the sole exclusive goal is likely to decide that students should *always* compose in standardized English—and simply accept the price that must be paid for working exclusively on this goal: a considerable delay not only in comfort and fluency of language but also in richness and complexity of thinking. But many teachers insist that fluency is not the only goal and want, for example, to give students the experience of being able to call on their richest thinking and widest range of imaginative and linguistic distinctions. For this, it will make more sense to invite students to start off writing such a piece in their home language or dialect. Many fluent writers treasure the striking experience of being hit by new ideas right in the midst of putting down words. For most people, this experience comes more often in low stakes writing where one can put down words quickly without always planning them in advance. A home language is likely to facilitate this kind of *cognitive* fluency. (Note, too, that many students who study English as a foreign language have a chance to write in their home language outside of their English class—whereas many students who speak a stigmatized dialect have no other chances to write it.)

So if, for example, students have to write a high stakes essay for some kind of assessment and there is extensive time for re-drafting and revision, or an essay or autobiography for admission to some program or for a job, Irvine and Elsasser's experience (and some of our own) suggests



that students may turn out a better final product in standardized English when they do lots of drafting and exploratory writing first in their home dialect or language. Of course this advantage holds only when other conditions or variables are favorable. Irvine and Elsasser's students needed to pass an essay test in standardized English. Nevertheless those researchers believe that they helped their students become more successful in standardized English by setting up *some* occasions for writing in Caribbean Creole—so that students could learn to take the rhetorical purposes for any written language into account.

(6) How much trust is there between students and teacher? Often, students can more easily trust a teacher who is a native speaker of the dialect or language in question—or a teacher who shares their race, ethnicity, and class. This issue is particularly important in the case of vernacular dialects such as AAVE or Caribbean Creoles. Such dialects, almost by definition, are media of intimacy: “mother tongues” used in the family and in-groups. Some students are liable to feel it inappropriate or even offensive to use a “home language” in the impersonal market place of the classroom. Irvine and Elsasser were white outsiders to the Virgin Island and not experienced with Creole. They had to work hard to establish a climate of trust—and got a lot of benefit from bringing a local linguist and several local Creole writers to the class. Eileen Kennedy, in her study of Caribbean students, shows how her invitations to use a vernacular dialect went unheeded until she created more intimacy by speaking and writing about her own dialectal history and sharing more of her life with her students. At this point, students started experimenting with their vernacular, and the whole climate of the class became much closer. In ESL or EFL classrooms, a teacher whose home language is not English is likely to have valuable insights to share with students about the process of learning English—and is sometimes granted special credibility on those grounds. However, teachers who speak English as their mother tongue are sometimes granted more authority because they are insiders to the target language and culture, especially in EFL settings. Native and nonnative-English speakers bring different yet complementary strengths to the classroom (Matsuda and Matsuda).

(7) Is the home dialect or language commonly used for writing? Does it have a settled orthography? Can the teacher provide readings in the home language? Are the students comfortable reading and writing in their home dialect or language?—or even able to read or write at all? The more these questions can be answered “Yes,” the easier it is likely to be for students to write in their home dialect or language. Yet even though students in the College of the Virgin Islands had never written in Creole, and there was no settled orthography at that time for their varieties of Creole, nevertheless Irvine and Elsasser invited some writing in it for audiences outside the classroom. They set students the problem of working out issues of orthography for a collaborative writing project in Creole. This served as a powerful meta-lesson about the nature of language standardization, not only in their own language for indigenous Creole genres and purposes, but also in standardized English for academic purposes.

Even if students have written rather little in *any* language—as is the case with some ESL students even in college classrooms—a case could be made for inviting some writing in that home language or dialect. For when such students try to write in standardized English, they face a double hurdle: an unfamiliar language and an unfamiliar medium. We noted from some of our own informal experiments in teaching that students *can* get comfortable writing in a

language “by ear”—even when they are not literate in it or there is no official orthography. Indeed, an official orthography sometimes makes writers worry about spelling.

(8) What is the process by which students move from exploratory writing or early drafts in a home dialect or language to revised and final versions in standardized English: *word-for-word translating* or *more global rewriting/revising*? This question is particularly important for students writing in a completely different language from English. The problems caused by translation are obvious and have often been noted:

First, [translating] does not solve the problem that students are not able to fully and fluently express their ideas in English, a task they will be asked to perform throughout their school years. Second, having students use one language to negotiate the other can limit their opportunities of learning to express their ideas in English, reduce authentic reasons for using English, and diminish their felt need to learn to express their ideas in English. (Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins 43)

The extensive use of translation may hinder second-language writing fluency and delay the development of an awareness of the expectations of a second-language audience. (Kobayashi and Rinnert 205)

Also, of course, word-for-word translating often leads to words and syntax that are inappropriate or wrong for L2.

But students can get the benefits of writing in a home language and still avoid the problems of direct translation. Peter Elbow worked with a woman who spoke Puerto Rican-based Spanish. She was not highly literate in her mother tongue, but she found it a great relief to write in it and found she could write many more thoughts and much more quickly. When she translated directly from her Spanish, she ran into the obvious problems of false cognates and inappropriate syntax for English. But when she put her Spanish text completely aside (after looking it over) and set herself the task of revising or rewriting—*composing explicitly in English* on the basis of it—she was able to call on the richer thinking and subtler distinctions she had produced thanks to her home language. In this revising task, she was working in standardized English—trying to use its lexicon and syntax. Of course she experienced the frustration of having more complex and subtle meanings in mind that were difficult for her to render in English. But at least she *had* that rich content driving her, and so she had a good incentive to stretch her use of English.

If this rewriting/revising approach proves beneficial in further research and classroom trials, it will yield a point of strategic leverage: when students compose in a language other than English and then rewrite/revise wholly in English—not seeing the lexicon and syntax of their home language and not trying to stay tied to it—they will get a double benefit: the benefit of composing or inventing in their home language, but also the benefit of *composing again in English* and thus practicing and developing a kind of syntactic fluency in the target language. This approach thus cuts through the over-simple either/or choice about whether to compose in standardized English or some other language: students can practice composing in both languages. Every time they go through this process, it will be a good occasion for reflecting on the contrasting resources of each language and the discourse or culture it tends to carry.

(9) Who chooses whether to write in a language different from standardized English—the student or the teacher (or the institution)? We suspect most readers would agree that students should not be forced or even pressured into this option. Thus we stress our word “invite”—not “assign” or “require.” And we have seen a variety of good reasons for student reluctance or resistance or refusal: some may not want to use a home language for *any* classroom task; some may not want to use it for academic rhetorical tasks that feel impersonal, abstract, and alien to home rhetorical traditions; some may not want to use it because they want practice in producing or generating standardized English (and are willing to pay the price of reduced comfort, fluency, and power in generating); and some may feel that they have too few allies in the class and so will need to use vernacular dialect only for private writing (if at all). In addition, sadly, a few won’t want to use their home dialect because they have been taught to disapprove of it as a second-rate or broken language (just as Jesse Jackson called Ebonics “trash talk”). We can hope to chip away at this misconception, but we agree that even here, the student must retain choice.

But if choice is important, then we note this: in most classrooms, *students now have no choice*. That is, in most classrooms where the dominant variety of English is the norm, students feel it is wrong to write in a different dialect or language.

(10) A final variable. We’ve not yet mentioned the one that usually plays the biggest role in classrooms: the teacher’s own beliefs or convictions. In our hope of making this essay useful to all readers, whatever their attitudes toward the use of home languages or dialects, we have tended to frame our discussion pragmatically—almost as though the only reason to invite students to write in a home language is in order to improve their writing in standardized English. But that’s far from the whole story for us—especially when it comes to nondominant varieties of English. We take linguistic richness and bilingualism as values in themselves (Haswell). We sense the danger that standardized English will drive out other varieties of English—as it is putting pressure on other languages around the globe (Skutnabb-Kangas). Also, American academic discourse has a powerful ability to assimilate and neutralize other discourses and dialects (Dobrin). We believe that more work is needed in order to invite language minority students into higher education, and that towards this end it is important to honor the legitimacy and linguistic sophistication of all languages and dialects. Thus we affirm the 4Cs statement on “Students’ Rights to their Own Language” (Committee) and the Linguistic Society of America “Statement on Language Rights.”

Turning again to our classrooms, then, we’d argue that even if *most* writing needs to end up in the dominant version of written English, it still makes good pedagogical and human sense occasionally to invite speakers of nonstandardized varieties of English and speakers of languages other than English to write something in their home language that they do *not* turn into standardized English: a finished, revised, copy edited, cherished piece in the student’s home dialect or language. It’s best when this piece is published in a class publication—just as regular student essays in standardized English are often published in the classroom (Elbow “The Role of Publication”). Furthermore, it will sometimes make sense for students to experiment with “writing back”—transforming their pieces in standardized English into versions in a home language: neither one privileged, neither one devalued.

Widespread change in classroom practices will require widespread change in teacher beliefs (Lehner). But there are reasons for hope. The rise of “world Englishes” around the globe is causing diverse varieties of English to be widely used, published, and sanctioned, thereby creating contexts in which the idea of a “standard English,” itself, is recurrently questioned and critiqued. (But obviously it’s a problem when any version of English serves to undermine a local indigenous language). The history of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance shows how stigmatized varieties of Latin came eventually to flower as Romance languages recognized as legitimate for writing and publication. There is more and more publication of writing in nondominant varieties of English (see Elbow “Vernacular” for more on this). Furthermore, the standardized variety of English and the conventions of academic discourse are gradually evolving as members of the academic world become increasingly diverse, both linguistically and culturally (Matsuda).

As we try to pull together what we have learned, we conclude that an invitation to write in a home dialect or language should be offered with:

- respect for the complexities of the invitation;
- respect for the many good reasons students might have for declining the objection (see variable #9);
- help for students in learning about the home language and the politics around it;
- awareness of our institutional complicity in the stigmatizing of the dialect;
- awareness of all that we teachers don’t know and must try to learn about the vexedness of writing in a stigmatized dialect or language.

[TO THE EDITOR. PLEASE ADD AN EXTRA SPACE HERE TO SIGNAL A BREAK BEFORE OUR FINAL WORD. IF OTHER PARAGRAPHS ARE INDENTED, PLEASE MAKE THIS START FLUSH LEFT—AFTER THE INDENTED LINES OF POETRY]

what i be talking about  
can be said in this language  
only

Lucile Clifton’s poem sets the essential dilemma not just for us but for an enormous number of teachers: what someone from one culture is thinking may not be fully sayable in the language of another culture. By inviting home languages in classrooms dominated by standardized English, we seem to be pursuing an impossible goal. What shall we do? Throw up our hands and say “Write only what you can think in the new language”? This is not something we are willing to do. Just because a goal is impossible doesn’t mean that there’s no difference between getting closer to it and giving up. Besides, should we refrain from helping people write things in the language that fits them best, just because English is not right for expressing some of those things? Shall we decide not to read Homer unless we read Greek? Nevertheless, the essential dilemma remains and it explains why our essay is driven more by questions than answers.

Thus we have committed ourselves to further work on this perplexing issue—thinking, experimentation, and research—and we will gather again in the summer of 2003. Because we are such a small group with limited means, please read our essay as a plea for more experimentation and research from you. Contact any of us with what you can discover.

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