

Finding a Voice in Standard American English

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Razan Alansari (2018) wrote of her life in a Quranic girls' school in her homeland, and it is with this powerful voice that she opens and closes her autoethnography:

A long green dress, black shoes and long white socks, and a long braid down the back tied in a white bow made up the customary uniform for any girl attending the Quranic School in my city, Dammam, which I attended grades 1-12....We were required...to memorize...verses from the Quran every day...By the time we reached 9th grade, we knew the whole Quran by heart, and by 12th grade we had covered the whole Quran twice. Daily, we would recite it to the teacher in the first two classes every school day....The recitation coming from all three floors...filled the silence... and anyone could hear us from afar, as they passed by. (2018, p. 1)

There is no doubt that Razan has found a voice in the English language when she writes and speaks, and at the same time she has achieved authorial distance needed to write a review of literature. Razan's autoethnography ends as it began—at the Quranic girls' school:

My daughter, who is due in July of 2018, will have a different experience from her brothers' but similar to mine, as she will start learning her heritage language, Arabic, inside her home country surrounded by her family members who speak Arabic. She will enroll in a Quranic girls' school in Saudi Arabia and memorize the whole Quran by heart just as her mother did. And I hope someday I will be able to pass by her school and listen to the girls reciting the Quran, knowing that my daughter is one of them. (p. 52)



Former WAESOL President and board member, LaVona Reeves, is Professor of English and TESL Graduate Program Director at Eastern Washington University, where she teaches linguistics, literature, TESL, and gender studies. She has also taught at the University of Wyoming, Boise State, Osaka University, and Harvard and in the NYC and Boise public schools-- primarily ESL, English, French, journalism, and reading. Her work has appeared in the WAESOL Quarterly and WAESOL Newsletter, and in national and international journals. She is currently working on an oral history of her mother.

At no point in her writing does Razan appropriate her voice to others. We hear the voice of a mother, an international student, and an English teacher. It is an authentic voice that rings true to our ears, but it took Razan time to find that voice in English. In class, it took daily reflective writing with empathetic response from instructors, interns, and peers who created a community of writers and served as a real and immediate audience needed by all writers, not just multilingual writers. The pertinence for offering these opportunities within ESL composition classrooms is made evident by ELLs' like Razan.

As multilingual writers ourselves, it has taken time for us to find our voices in French, Japanese, and Russian, so we are especially concerned about multilingual writers' desire to have an academic voice while retaining their sense of self and ethnic identity. Peter Elbow asked teachers to reconsider the role of voice in students' writing, yet many require students to silence their "authentic" voices in order to achieve authorial distance, which is considered an element of Standard American English (SAE) needed for academic success. Despite the movement called Students' Rights to their Own Language (SRTOL) (Perryman-Clark, 2016; Sledd, 1969, 1986), authorial distance and an academic voice are privileged in academic settings. It can also be argued that writers can find and/or develop a self that can navigate in multiple discourses. Perryman-Clark (2016) "extends SRTOL as a framework for helping college writing students understand the ways that they can make purposeful and strategic choices about language practices in the composition classroom" (p. 470), suggesting that students can explore a variety of voices for different purposes while increasing fluency and self-awareness, as Razan has done. Berlin (1988) stated, "[...] rhetoric is regarded as always ideological" (p. 477). Instructors who prefer attending to "voice"—the "spoken medium of language [that] highlights language as sounded, heard, and existing in time" (Elbow, 2007, p. 175) are doing so to create spaces for authentic communication as demonstrated by Razan, who claims her voice and owns her experience in the Quranic school narrative.

Others would avoid acknowledging voice altogether because the strong voice of the writer may make critical analysis of the text more difficult. There may not be enough authorial distance. Elbow suggests a "both/and" solution as a means to encourage

thorough and comprehensive rhetorical analysis in writing (p. 184). By this, he means that it is possible to both attend to voice as a means of developing authenticity and to disregard voice for the same reason. This is a highly global perspective as it is inclusive of diverse populations. However, we include one more lens: the audience lens. The audience lens will aid in the production of multilingual rhetorics, and at the same time SAE acquisition may help writers discover dynamic layers of “self.”

Clearly, to understand SAE holistically, it is necessary for multilingual writers to decipher advanced grammatical structures as well as historical and societal references about the United States. Cummins (in Leki, 2004) argued that this level of cognition “takes a relatively long time [to develop], long enough so that permanent resident students entering English medium high schools may in fact get to graduation before having developed academic proficiency in English” (p. 333). Some would argue that writers begin with a no-voice or as stated by Elbow, “text-lens” wherein they learn the language through “words on a page” and analyze “the bare root meaning, logic, and patterns” of English (2007, p.175). Like Leonard (2014), we would counter-argue, however, that multilingual writers “be encouraged to compose from the full expanse of their languages and literacies,” but we remain mindful that “such championing can suggest that multilingual writers’ resources are fixed and stable, traveling with them from one location or language to another as an unchanged repertoire of knowledge and skills” (p. 227-228). Clearly, SAE acquisition is inextricably linked to academic literacies in other languages, and we must create spaces for writers to explore those connections in their own daily writing, which we encourage writers to do, and we write with our students on a daily basis (Aguilar, 2016; Alamri, 2018; Alansari, 2018; Aldoshan, 2017; Sanchez, 2016).

Jan Frodesen’s chapter in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (Celce-Murica, 2014) explores the potential of acquiring linguistic competence through accuracy. Developing accuracy, “conforming to the language system” can lead to “intuitions” “about the language” and competence (2014, p. 353). Grammatical structures can be presented as formulas for expressing meaning. English syntax can be presented as a reflection of the directness and explicitness of SAE, where the

'subject' is mandatorily first to preserve focus, the 'verb' states the purpose of the 'subject', and the 'object' is only essential because it further explicates the subject's purpose. With explicit instruction, writers can begin to see how authority and directness may be embedded in SAE syntax. ELLs, however, may come from cultures that give and receive information indirectly, nonlinearly, and implicitly, whereby meaning is derived from inference and common knowledge. Individuals from these backgrounds may produce texts that demonstrate these characteristics, demanding more responsibility from the receiver/reader. This tendency often comes from more oral and homogeneous cultures, and writers may struggle to understand a diverse audience without a shared background. An example appears in the work of Peter Lacey (2013) in which a Chinese writer simply completed a poem when a stanza was omitted by the researcher. She, like most Chinese, had memorized Tang Dynasty poetry from early childhood, and she realized that her audience would not know of this poem and would not understand her essay if she did not complete the poem for readers and analyze this missing stanza.

We recommend that ELLs focus not only on text (no-voice lens) or voice (voice lens) in making rhetorical choices, but also on the holistic by including an audience lens, which may lead to more developed writing. Moreover, this will encourage students to reflect on how and why they think as they do, thus fostering personal growth. In doing so it is necessary to familiarize our students of the cultural nuances in the language to avoid instructing SLA through a "utilitarian view" meaning, "that language is taught apart from culture, with cultural values often being deemed irrelevant (Larson-Freeman 2016, p. 221). As globalization continues, this separation of language and culture may prevail, and the loss of cultural underpinnings may negatively impact acquisition of academic writing. We may revert back to the text-bound, no voice interpretation.

As ESL professionals, we offer opportunities to explore "human responses to the material conditions of existence, the social relations they encourage, and the interpellations of subjects within them [that] are always already ideological, are always already interpretations..." as Berlin stated (1988, p. 490). By including the audience's perspective to Elbow's "both/and"

lenses, we ask ELLs to disclose their biases and consider how these influence their writing and research, denying neither the L1 nor the L2 voice. This approach requires students to include multi-perspectival content. Through the addition of the third lens to Elbow's conception of voice, diverse writers will gain greater access to SAE, asking themselves: "How do I see it? How will my audience see it?" These questions make L2 students "social-epistemic" rhetoricians as they are forced to identify "how and why they know what they know versus how and why they know what they know," making transparent that "knowledge [is] an arena of ideological conflict" (Berlin, p. 489). "We may be constructed by culture, but if we learn to analyze carefully enough how this happens, then we can actually work toward a fairer world" (Smith and Freisinger qtd. in Elbow, 2007). Just as awareness of our culturally embedded attitudes can facilitate the restructuring of them, awareness of our audience's perceptions and voices can open communication for readers, as Razan's words did for us here.

Like Lacina (2018), we recommend (1) connecting reading to writing instruction while reading aloud to students to increase their sensitivity to voice; (2) recognizing "that everyone is a writer" and providing "excellent examples of writing" while writing together (p. 62); and (3) making "writing meaningful and authentic, focusing on content development" (p. 63) as we did with Razan in conference. To this, we add (4) creating space in the writing classroom where we can have time to write every day to explore our histories and find our voices across languages and cultures.

We may be linguistically bound by our realities, and thus as language learners we engage with unfamiliar information, we must undergo a process of analysis: first, understanding that this structure (text and alphabet) states a specific idea (no-voice approach), and then understanding why and how that structure represents that idea (voice approach). The second step of analysis can be more fully realized through awareness of audience—their beliefs, their gaps in knowledge of the topic, and their interest in the message. How would the average, American audience know that Saudi girls in Razan's school would have memorized the Quran twice by the time they completed 12th grade if that is not explained? We can write literacy narratives with our students, share, and find a

voice that is authentic and that lays a foundation for the more distant authorial voice.

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