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Not You/Like You, With You: Toward a Praxis of Love, Learning, and Liberation in Teaching EFL Writing — On Zombies, De-colonial Feminisms, and Freire in EFL Contact Zones

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**Not You/Like You, *With* You:
Toward a Praxis of Love, Learning, and Liberation in Teaching EFL
Writing**

On Zombies, De-colonial Feminisms, and Freire in EFL Contact Zones

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of
Arts in Teaching degree at the SIT Graduate Institute,
Brattleboro, Vermont.

August 1, 2012

Advisor: Elizabeth Tannenbaum

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Student name: Jessmaya Morales

Date: August 1, 2012

Gratitude

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Abstract

This paper explores EFL writing as a critical contact zone in which identity and subjectivity are found, denied, contested, de/constructed and occupied. The author opens with an account of a dream, utilized as a metaphor to examine EFL learning through the analytical lens of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The paper's first section is a self-reflexive discussion of Freire's pedagogy and why his unambiguous analyses of power, subjectivity, and the "banking system of education" are vital to the field of ELT. In the second section, the author discusses subjectivity, identity, and intersectionality as rooted in the work of feminist theorists Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. The author offers her own definition of identity and then explores the work of Fan Shen, Bonny Norton and Ryuko Kubota from the direction of Critical Pedagogy. The third section of the paper features the voices of EFL learners the author surveyed about writing and several published fiction writers talking about writing. The author proposes the teaching of writing as a critical piece in empowering EFL language learners through a deep and loving recognition of teachers *and* learners as whole people with complex and shifting identities. In the last section of the paper, the author presents an open letter to EFL writing teachers, and calls for a praxis that embodies the three Ls – love, learning, and liberation. The author concludes with a self-reflexive look at her own process of writing the paper.

Keywords: writing, dialogue, TEFL, identity, subjectivity, intersectionality, love, education, liberation

ERIC Descriptors:

EFL
English Language Teaching
Critical Pedagogy
Writing Instruction
Praxis
Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
First and Second Language Acquisition
Critical Theory

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There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. But while to say the true word — which is work, which is praxis — is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently no one can say a true word alone — nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs other of their words.

~ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The moral courage to face oneself as one is in different situations, mental or social, to watch oneself as one is in one's attitude to people, ideas, and ideals, is a creative act, and one of the ways of freeing the creativity in one so that it exercises itself and permeates all one's activity.

~ Shakti Datta, *The Place of Love in Education*

Section 1

How I Came to Write/Right Here: Mapping a Journey

A Self-Reflexive Look at Writing Academically about Teaching EFL Academic Writing

In a dream I had while I was researching to write this paper, a colleague/friend and I were guiding a two-headed dragon through a school building, looking for a safe way to get it through it to the other side without getting lost or being seen. The heads were disembodied and not attached to each other (not sure where the dragon's body was, but perhaps we were trying to re-unite the heads with their body?). My colleague/friend was lecturing the dragonheads as we walked (well, the heads kind of floated) down a flight of stairs toward the ground floor. Each head had a long, thick neck about as big around as a my two arms making a circle. No sooner had he warned, "...and stay out of the bathrooms and hallways, just stay close to us!" when we observed the head he was leading swoosh down the last few stairs and into a bathroom/locker room to our left. I said to my colleague/friend (now, my brother in the dream), "OK, you go get that one, I'll stay with this one and wait for you." But when my dragonhead and I turned to look down the open hallways ahead and to the right of the foot of the stairs, we were met with a horrific bloodbath in the quad: people (university students, teachers) and student/teacher zombies engaged in a chaotic fray of biting, struggling, screams, and horrific bone-crunching sounds.

I put my arm around the dragonhead and scooped us into what seemed to be a small meeting room for cover on our right, pushing the lock button in on the aluminum knob just as a student came screaming and running toward the door to get in, pulling on the knob and banging his hands on the glass for help. (The door and the wall facing the quad were made of thick glass.)

The student was being attacked by a zombie as he was pleading and screaming for us to let him in. The dragonhead shouted in my mind, “Why didn’t you let him in? We can help him, what are you doing?! You have to help him! Open the door!”

“It’s too late,” I answered, “Look, he’s already been bitten. He’s going to turn into a zombie, too!” I shuddered in terror as I thought of my colleague-now-brother who’d gone into the bathroom after the other dragon head, and the horrific scene that might be underway in there. Suddenly, as though a radio dial had tuned into some signal, there was a woman’s voice giving a clear and very factual-sounding lecture in my head or maybe in the room. She was saying, “...what people don’t realize is that zombies are actually a psychosocial phenomenon entirely based upon fear and belief. Being bitten by a zombie doesn’t make you a zombie at all, people simply *believe* it does, so they become zombies. But they could snap out of this at any moment if they knew! If people had this information...“ I felt like the message made sense and was probably true, but I feared that it could be wrong, and I dreaded opening the door onto the ferocious battle outside. Yet, I knew the chances of survival were pretty slim, anyway — holed up in this tiny room with a light on and a glass wall and door, like animals in a terrarium...

At this point, I woke up, heart racing and a shuddery feeling in my gut. Pushing aside the mosquito netting and slapping bare feet across cool tiles to the bathroom sink, I splashed

my face with water in the dark and realized that the student's face pressed to the glass had actually been the face of one of the teachers I'd worked with.

Not coincidentally, I must admit that I was in the habit of referring to a former teaching context as "zombie-land." Sitting down to write this paper, I conjure the face of the terrified teacher-faced student pressed to the glass and begging for help; the zombie teacher heading straight for the student's jugular and chomping down; the inquisitive, enlightened, and mischievous dragonheads my colleague and I were trying to shepherd to freedom and safety; and my impending moment of decision amid a cacophony of competing narratives and voices.

Diving in¹ with Freire's concept of the true word

There is no such thing as a *neutral* education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history. For those who are committed to that task and are searching for concepts and tools for experimentation, Paolo Freire's

¹ Term 'Diving in' borrowed from Mina P. Shaughnessy, 1998, additional discussion and citation in section 3.

thought will make a significant contribution in the years ahead. (Shaul in Freire, 2000, p. 34)

One of the first things I did in order to prepare myself to write this paper about Teaching EFL writing was to read Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. While some might find that an odd choice, I did so for several important reasons. The most obvious reason is because Freire's work was concerned not simply with liberation of the oppressed, but liberation through a kind of *powerful literacy* (Gee, 1989), and I have always associated literacy with writing, though it is so much more than that. Another important factor in my choice to go back in time a bit and focus on Freire was the knowledge that his work has been of pivotal importance in the praxes of many educators, scholars, and activists who value learning, liberation, and love; or the three Ls, as I will refer to them from here forward. I feel it is fitting to embark on this journey with Freire as one of my guides, because as an American citizen teaching internationally, he offers a critical lens through which to examine the class, power, and in many ways *neo-colonial* dynamics that pervade the teaching and learning of the English language in many contexts throughout the world. This is absolutely not to purport that every instance in the teaching and learning of English in EFL contexts is necessarily one which oppresses the learner; however, I do think it is important to recognize that there are systemic dynamics of power and discourse in which the un-reflective teacher, administrator, and learner can easily find ourselves entangled.

My disappointment and frustration with the rampant oppression masked as teaching-and-learning taking place in many EFL learning environments thrums beneath the waking process of thinking about — and writing — this paper. Because I am both a teacher seeking a pedagogy that values the three Ls, *and* a student of the subordination of teaching to learning (C. Gattegno,

1971)², I think it would be disingenuous of me to write about teaching EFL writing courses without considering both my own role in education, and more broadly, the stunningly commodifying and objectifying *battleground* (or shopping mall) education has become in far too many contexts in the world — not excluding my own country. Students and jobseekers struggle to pass dehumanizing standardized tests, sometimes paying for course and test fees over and over to get a passing score in order to be able to apply for a job in which many find they will never have to use English. Still other students and teachers find themselves turning textbook page after textbook page in a daze — the teacher lacking training, and the student praying for a snow day, a typhoon day, or any valid excuse to leave the classroom. In Taiwan, many children and youth attend cram schools after an already-long school day to ‘cram in’ as much English as possible. Some show early signs of depression and stress-related anxiety or behavioral issues, and others nod off at their desks in exhaustion as they pray for the clock to strike 9:10 p.m. In EFL contexts, this state of English education cannot be explained as simply a problem in the dynamic between teachers and students in the classroom; nor can it be rationalized as the innocent desire of a growing number of people to use English as a Lingua Franca around the world, devoid of any connection to national educational policies and business models that privilege ‘the West’.

The rampant oppression I’m referring to in too many EFL learning environments is a dynamic that finds expression both *inside* and *outside* of the learner herself, the classroom, the teacher herself, the program or school, the family, the community, city, country, and the world. This reality of people and entities in overlapping and progressively wider or larger contexts is often visualized as a set of concentric circles in which we might place the learner — or the

² Caleb Gattegno was a lifelong student of *learning* and, among other interests and work, was the innovator of “The Silent Way”, a way of teaching language that utilized specially colored charts (Fidel Charts) and small wooden blocks of different lengths and colors (Cuisenaire Rods) to focus the energy of the classroom completely on the learner. More information about him, including digital versions of his published works can be found at www.calebgettegn.org.

teacher — at the center.³ Instead of starting with the work of more recently published scholars and teachers, I choose to deal with the self-professed radical writing of Freire, and his conception of a pedagogy that liberates its subjects from relationships of domination not only in the interest of my own learning, but also in the interest of using a clear and active language to discuss my experience, and the experiences that EFL learners have shared with me. Over the course of reading various articles and books for my graduate program, I often read underlying themes in many of them that I would perceive as rooted in or borrowing from Freire's vision of a pedagogy that liberates. And while I could discern and appreciate what those underlying messages were, I feel somewhat dissatisfied with these kinds of sources. Their use of de-politicized and non-confrontational language that skirts a wide path around the realities of oppression, dominance, homophobia, violence, love, de-colonial praxes, xenophobia, racism, classism, and capitalist values - to name a few - is ultimately alienating in the search for pragmatic solutions. I believe that behind the careful sidestepping of terms is most often a genuine and dedicated effort to deconstruct historically over-simplified and essentializing definitions of power, race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation in a postmodern framework. However, I see that this careful re-coding of terms can also serve the function of satisfying the conservative mores of 'academic writing', which consider taboo anything written with too fiery a tongue, too much passion, and/or too human a voice. (Anzaldúa, 1983) The result of this is the creation of entire bodies of theoretical work that water down, whitewash, and obscure the real, lived experience of actual people who find ourselves negotiating oppression; in effect erasing the very subjects whom the theoretical work is trying to engage in the first place. As Freire (2000) points out,

³ See Appendix A

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (p. 87)

Critical questions loom for me as I write from within the academy about the lived realities of teaching and learning in EFL contexts. What is my responsibility to true words, here? Is my interest in the approval of the academy, or am I interested in the transformational potential, both for myself and others, of my work — written in the way that *I* write it? Freire (2000) elaborates on the true word, “When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well: and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating ‘blah’”(p.87). This speaks to me directly of the role of praxis in writing and in learning to write. Whether writing for the academy, writing for myself, or helping my students learn to write, I am most interested in tossing out the ‘alienating blah’ in favor of the three Ls. While this makes the writing process a messier, more demanding, and high-stakes work, I believe it is worth it. Thanks to the work of so many feminist/womanist writers before me who have viewed writing in this way, I am acutely aware that every ‘true word’ we write has enormous creative potential and power in the process of both our own, and our world’s *becoming*.⁴

⁴ “The social structure, in order to *be*, must *become*; in other words, *becoming* is the way the social structure expresses *duration*, in the Bergsonian sense of the term. ...What makes a *social* structure (and thus historical-cultural) is neither permanence nor change, taken absolutely, but the dialectical relations between the two. In the last analysis, what endures in the social structure is neither permanence nor change; it is the permanence-change dialectic itself.”(Freire, 2000, p.179)

On *Becoming* in a Banking System

The bank-clerk educator⁵ does not realize that there is no true security in his hypertrophied role, that one must seek to live with others in solidarity. One cannot impose oneself, nor even merely co-exist with one's students. Solidarity requires true communication, and the concept by which such an educator is guided fears and proscribes communication. Yet, only through communication can human life hold meaning. (Freire, 2000, pp.76-77)

I know I am not the only language teacher who has witnessed how English proficiency tests are being used as gatekeeping mechanisms - within local EFL contexts - to determine who gets into the limited numbers of spots in prestigious schools; whether one can graduate from a University (even if the focus of study has no relation to a need for English language proficiency); which applicants get even a glance at their resumes by HR departments; and who is ultimately considered qualified for hire (even when the job does not require English language abilities).

Private companies, language courses, universities, and government bodies implement proficiency tests and mandatory language courses. We — teachers of English as a foreign language — work for these institutions. We wave their flags, wear their logos, attend their staff meetings, and often teach their pre-ordered textbooks. Native and non-native speaker teachers of English alike witness the real effects that these tests have on our, and our students', lives. When the measure of an EFL learner's English proficiency has come to function as a gatekeeper in this

⁵ Freire refers to "banking model" of education, which is active on the teacher's part and passive on the students'. The teacher deposits information. (Freire, 2000) This has expanded to a systemic problem where education is something a student buys, and expects to be delivered. Given the amount of money people all over the world are finding ourselves required to pay in order to seek out education that is legitimized by business and government, there can be no denying that in 2012, this concept doesn't even function as a metaphor, it's become one of the realities of education as we know it today.

way in countries that have prioritized the learning of English for their citizens/workers for social, business or governmental reasons; it is inevitable that what we are dealing with is the relationship of language to power.

In a world where power has historically been conceptualized more often by one's ownership of property and capital than it has through critical voices of consciousness, collective action, and situational dynamics⁶ — and is still conceptualized in this manner by dominant world discourses; there remains a direct and undeniable connection between learning English and one's ability to access resources, opportunities, and the networks needed for success (as defined by dominant discourse). This is true whether English is being used as a practical tool in work or scholarship, or whether it is simply functioning as a form of symbolic capital, as is often the case in EFL learning contexts.

This connection between attaining prescribed levels of English proficiency and access to resources is often seen; and yet, it is *not* seen, because it is not seen as inherently problematic. For many teachers, learners, and administrators, this “banking system of education” (Freire, 1970, Ch.2) is apprehended at face value and complied with unquestioningly. Teachers, students, families, and communities; and those within government agencies, businesses and schools *all* participate; often without seeking to understand and question the integral relationships of power, access, and domination implicit therein. How else can individuals caught up in this system be expected to act, if seeking to understand these relationships might undermine our ability to participate in this system, and thereby inhibit us from gaining the very access we seek? In other words; of course, EFL learners are free to opt-out of this dynamic of

⁶ For a critical discussion of power, see Michel Foucault's work.

English-language-proficiency-as-gatekeeper. However, in an overwhelming number of cases this would mean opting out of their entire local educational and economic system.

Teachers, too, are free to opt out, but this is also a loaded decision. When I, as a reflectively trained teacher, left a former position in a cram school in Taiwan (where I taught English between summers of attending my MA program at SIT Graduate Institute), my replacement was a recent college graduate who knew “zip-zero about teaching” and learning. She unwittingly supported the ‘banking system’ norms of the school without question, because her role in Taiwan as a teacher of English was one concerned with travel, adventure, booze, fun times, and a highly paid job (compared to local teachers) as a native speaker of English (Name withheld, personal communication, May 2011). So, of course, I can simply renounce my participation in English language teaching for the reason that, in many places, it is being used as a gate-keeping mechanism — a motive for language learning that I inherently disagree with. However, with a fresh-faced neo-colonial explorer waiting in the wings to fill my position, will my departure do anything to help change the dynamic? Can I transform the banking model of EFL education by simply turning my back on it, and working in a different profession? My feeling is that the answer to both of these questions can really be ‘yes’, ‘no’ *and* ‘maybe’, though I’m sure that some might balk at my naked honesty here. I believe that we must change this system from both the inside *and* the outside, and that the decision about which direction from which to work is really a personal one that must depend more on our self-assessed personal strengths, characteristics, and needs than upon anything else. For now, I have chosen *in*, with the goal of encouraging and supporting much-needed dialogue in classroom and staffroom spaces.

Teachers *can* change the dynamics of oppression and cultural invasion that have developed around the teaching and learning of English in many contexts around the world.

There is not doubt that this *is* a personally demanding task, but in the interest of both our own liberation as teachers, and that of so many more students entangled in the fray of the banking system — some with faces pressed to the glass and screaming for liberation from the zombie-lands that abound in the field of ELT: I believe it must be deemed worth it. In order for us, as teachers, to counter the ever-present possibility of the threat of English as a killer language in EFL contexts, due to the economic and socio-cultural effects of a rapid globalization based on capitalist values (with English historically being its primary mode of transmission); we *must* be aware of how our own presence in the classroom either feeds into a reality of cultural invasion through the teaching of a dominant language, or resists and questions it *with* our students. I want to be clear, I say this not solely with native speaker teachers in mind, but *all* EFL teachers.

With the ultimate goal of subordinating teaching to learning for education as a practice of freedom, I invite fellow aspiring-to-become critical and reflective teachers of English to *occupy* Teaching English as a Foreign Language (ELT) with me. I'll be setting up camp in my classrooms, staffroom, and professional networks with substantive personal engagement and dialogue, active listening booths, reflection, storytelling sessions, Cuisenaire rods, and the experiential learning cycle. And I invite you to bring all of your skills, resources, talents, experience, colleagues, and students with you. Come, let's *occupy* ELT!

Through a critical praxis that includes loving, inspired, reflective teaching and learning, in connection with cultural work, I believe teachers can help to facilitate an awareness that will enable us to bring about much-needed changes in the praxis of not only language education, but education in general. We begin with ourselves, and then continue in this vital work *with* other teachers and colleagues, and *with* our students and their families, communities, cities, and

government policy makers. Even though I am not you, nor like you, I want to be engaged *with* you in working toward a practice of love, learning, and liberation.

Section 2

Using *I* In the interest of de-colonizing the EFL classroom

A discussion of the subjective voice, identity, and intersectionality in language teaching and learning

On the Subjective Voice

A significant part of my training in the MA TESOL program at SIT Graduate Institute has been to initiate a praxis of ever-endeavoring to be(come) a reflective teacher. Looking back and zooming in, I can say that my life prior to my SIT training was already concerned with initiating a praxis of ever-endeavoring to be(come) a reflective *person*. Through a sometimes wild assortment of life experience, different kinds of jobs and educational settings, relationships, and all of the demanding work – at once personal *and* intellectual - I did while working toward my degrees in feminist/women's studies⁷ and art; I appreciate and am grateful to say that I have learned a lot about the value of reflecting, noticing, and educable awareness (C. Gattegno, 1970).

I share this because — just as I believe that one of the most important and useful things teachers can do with our students is to engage them as whole people — I believe that my *academic* self, life, and voice are similarly inseparable from who I am as a whole person. I share my thoughts in this paper about teaching writing in EFL contexts from a unique perspective,

⁷ I completed my women's studies degree at the University of CA at Santa Cruz, and I treasure that journey as one of the most important things I will ever do in life.

which I am in no way interested in ignoring nor obscuring in favor of the classic academic favorite: the (illusion of the) objective.

I'm wildly aware that my own voice is not only the most suitable, but also the most valuable, that I can write in. I am also sharply aware that everything anyone writes/says is a *story*, and that each of us is preceded by stories, born into stories, and engaged in the process of telling or re-telling stories throughout our lives. Even the styles we use to tell our stories are stories. Some of us re-tell the stories told to us, others of us create new stories, and still others of us do some of both; weaving old and new together. No matter which way you slice it; we are all existing with/in a complex web of narratives that span time, space, and a mish-mash of interconnected, convergent and/or divergent realities.

Anyone who asserts that her/his story (or research paper, for that matter) is completely objective, factual, or somehow unaffected by the personal and subjective, is simply delusional. Freire (1970) wrote of subjectivity:

To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people. This objectivistic position is as ingenious as that of subjectivism, which postulates people without a world. (p. 50)

Everyone and everything exists within contexts wherein we occupy positions and utilize perspectives. However *shifting* our contexts/positions/perspectives may be; they exist, and are simply part of being living, breathing, interactive beings. While we can and should work to achieve fairness, balance, and justice, we cannot do this by ignoring our own subjectivities. When we ignore our subjectivity, we are both dehumanized and dehumanizing, and our lives are reduced to playing parts, acting out characters, reading from scripts. Cultivating a consciousness

about our own subjectivity is critical if we are interested in cultivating a praxis of the three Ls. This kind of consciousness has been described by Paulo Freire (1970), Shakti Datta (1960), Caleb Gattegno (1970), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990), and many others as *awareness*.

Until we have an awareness of our subjective selves in order to reflect upon them and *with* them, we are not free. It is in the awareness of our subjectivity that we find our potential for true words, and both personal and collective empowerment. As subjects, we acknowledge that our lived realities shape us, and we shape them.

On Identity and Intersectionality

Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked – not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire.

Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens.

Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper.

We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled.

Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up. Do not fake it, try to sell it for a handclap or your name in print.

Love, Gloria

(Anzaldúa, 1983, p.174)

My understanding of the way identity functions in teaching, learning and writing comes from a foundation in feminist theory that claims a right to speech from positions that have long been marginalized from the centers of the academy and its mores of objectivity, strict formulas and the primacy of white masculinity. In her writings published by independent feminist presses — and which have come to be foundational texts in ethnic, feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as other academic genres — Gloria Anzaldúa, an activist scholar and a radical visionary in feminist studies critical of the exclusivity of white feminisms, lit the way for queer third world women writers of color, and offered her experiences and perspectives as both a guide and a map, written from the shifting grounds of language, identity, culture, and place. As I grappled with my ability to use my own voice, not only within the context of the academy, but also in the workplace and in my relationships with family, communities, and individuals; reading Anzaldúa's work had a profound impact on my will to write, my will to speech.

The relationship of identity to language in Gloria Anzaldúa's work was particularly salient for me, because I come from a racially, culturally, geographically mixed family, in which Spanish was the mother tongue for some, but not for me. My struggle with existing both on the inside and the outside of the intimate language of family, of culture, and of place as I grew up had become both isolating and immobilizing for me until I read Anzaldúa's 1987 book, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. Stirring Spanish and English into a special mixture in her writing, she created an empowered and empowering space from which to *voice* the experience of living at the crossroads, or the *borderlands*, of culture, language, nation, gender, sexuality and race that so many of us have, yet struggle to find a way of grounding in a 'right to speech.'

From within a dominant discourse that sets everyone and everything into diametrically opposed positions; Anzaldúa wrote to carve out a *third space*. She conceptualized this third space as a *borderlands* (the plural is intentional); the space in between. A shifting ground made sometimes of earth, sometimes water and sometimes sky, where the liminality of one's lived experience, identity, and even gender could be understood, claimed, and voiced. In a way, Anzaldúa *occupied* the oft-essentialized concept of identity that predominated in the 1980's — renaming it, reclaiming it and reinventing its meanings *and* uses — and also engaged in a queer political occupation of the narrative space of U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Nearly three decades later, Anzaldúa's work has rippled through the academy. Her contribution of new language and terms with which to discuss identity and experience, and her conceptualization of borders as social and psychological realms where difference interacts, collides, clashes, communicates and/or co-exists — has filtered into the work of many, many scholars (whether they are aware of her influence or not).

About forty years since the academy was set abuzz with concepts of identity, the term is now widely used, both academically and popularly. Despite its widespread usage, if you search for a singular and authoritative definition, you will discover that identity is defined in myriad ways, and applied variously, depending upon who uses it, in what context, and for which purpose. It occurs to me that the myriad meanings of identity — ever-shifting, growing, contested, invented and re-invented by whomever is using the term — is not a coincidence. As such, it feels appropriate for *me* to define identity as I understand it, in order to facilitate your understanding of what I mean when I use it in this paper.

I will define identity as a process; a kind of dance in which the dancer moves, speaks, listens, responds, performs, collaborates — *or not*, has an audience, troupe, and/or a partner —

or not, and dances to music that is heard internally — *or not*, or heard externally and played by a group of musicians or an individual musician — *or not*, and so on. I could happily continue with the *identity as dance* metaphor, but I will leave that to you, and will instead sketch the outlines of a kind of definition in plain language to explain how I want to define and use the term “identity” in this paper:

Identity is the search for a self that can be seen, named, read, performed and/or voiced. I conceptualize ‘the self’ as an ever-in-motion, un-pinned, and non-unitary collection of both lived and imagined experience.

By ‘seen,’ I mean to imply visibility. By ‘named,’ I mean that identity can be defined, which calls up the connection of language to the identity/identifying process. I use ‘read’ to indicate perception; as in the way we can ‘read’ an art piece, ‘read’ a person’s mood. Identity can be read by the self and/or by a person, or collective of people, outside of the self. Thus, the perception or ‘reading’ of identity can be reflective, co-creative, and/or conflictive. By ‘performed,’ I want to invoke the variable, shifting, and interactive nature of *be-ing*; the notion that a thing or a person *is* in relation to what it is *not*. While it might feel slightly more abstract to digest at first, I would actually prefer to phrase the interactive nature of *be-ing* in a way that liberates us from a binary logic, as follows: what *is* always exists in relationship with the other ‘*is*’es around it, and these relationships are not necessarily oppositional, but may simply be relationships of *difference*. (Minh-ha, 1990) Finally, I use ‘voiced’ in my rendering of identity here to indicate that one’s identity can be expressed, given voice to, told (like a story). The fact that identity can be voiced speaks to the inherently *subjective* nature of identity.⁸

⁸ The meaning of my phrase, “the inherently *subjective* nature of identity” sounds deceptively simple, but this idea can be carefully deconstructed to understand how it is that some people are able to give voice to an identity that they have not subjectively experienced, or to explain why it is that we can understand the stories others tell, and experience them in a visceral way. Because identity is a both a subjective and a *performative*

In her powerful essay, *Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference*, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) discusses identity, power, and difference; problematizing essentialist concepts of identity, and at the same time cautioning us:

This is not to say that the historical I can be obscured and ignored and that differentiation cannot be made, but that I is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic and is always more or less in relation to a judging subject. Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider — two entities. They are also at work within the outsider herself or the insider, herself — a single entity. She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life. (p.375)

At the close of her essay, Minh-ha encourages a shift in definitions of identity as *core* or essentialist concepts, urging us to see what she terms, “the inappropriate other within every I,” and calling for “a practice of subjectivity” that is aware “of its own constituted nature” (p.375).

Some years after Anzaldúa and Minh-ha’s critical conceptualizations of identity, along came another concept (some might call it a metaphor) that would shake the foundations of feminist theory and legal rights discourse. Not surprisingly, it is a genre-crossing concept from a genre-crossing academic. The term, *intersectionality*, is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s, founder of The African American Policy Forum (think tank) and currently a law professor at UCLA. In the 1989 Volume of *The University of Chicago Forum*, she published an essay examining why and

process, it is possible to performatively *voice* an identity which one has not subjectively experienced in lived, clock-time. Similar to the way an actor can give voice to the subjectivity of a character. Or even, the way a transgendered person can live/inhabit/perform/’pass’ as the opposite gender to the point where they are perceived by others as *being* the opposite gender. In order to access the *truth* of that voicing, one must performatively *become* the other. Our minds are capable of performativity, and we are even capable of imagining (visualizing and feeling) experiences we have not actually had when we displace the self and performatively become the other. The reason we are capable of this is because the self is *already* performing its *own* identity in *relationship with* the other - as Minh-ha points out, so that *voicing* the other is a capacity that can be accessed from both within *and* without the self at once.

how the law was not addressing violence and discrimination against black women. Through a careful examination of legal decisions in several important discrimination cases, her use of simple yet profound metaphors, and the sharing of several personal events from her lived experience, Crenshaw exposed popular, academic, and legal theoretical constructions of identity based on singular and unitary identity ‘cores’ as ineffectual in securing safety and/or justice for black women. By exploring the ways in which black women experienced discrimination on the basis of both race and gender at the same time, in ways that were *both* distinct from *and* similar to the ways that white women and black men experienced discrimination, Crenshaw opened up a theoretical framework for understanding multiple oppressions and a complex and shifting notion of identity that accounted not only for the self, but the multiplicity of self, the multiplicity of the self-in-situation, and the multiple nature of oppression.⁹

My own conceptualization of identity in this paper credits and gives thanks to the work of all three of these women, without whom I might not bring the analysis of identity, subjectivity, and voice that I do to my work in ELT.

This brings me to the work of an important teacher-scholar in the field of language teaching, and his critical voice in the discussion of identity and subjectivity. I want to briefly address Fan Shen’s 1989 essay, *The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition*. In an appeal to language teachers to consider culture in their

⁹ Crenshaw used the metaphor of the traffic intersection to explain intersectionality: “Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. Judicial decisions which premise intersectional relief on a showing that Black women are specifically recognized as a class are analogous to a doctor’s decision at the scene of an accident to treat an accident victim only if the injury is recognized by medical insurance. Similarly, providing legal relief only when Black women show that their claims are based on race or on sex is analogous to calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries -is identified. But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. In these cases the tendency seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away.”(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

teaching practices, Shen discussed the splitting and shifting of his own identity as he learned to write in English, after being accustomed to writing in his first language (Chinese) for so long. He described his learning process; how disorienting it felt to have to learn a new (to him) and different system of logic, utilize a different subject/narrator (from the Chinese preference for ‘we’ to the Western preference for ‘I’), and completely change the structure of his writing. He was accustomed to a particular format in Chinese writing in which a topic was developed sometimes pictorially but always gradually, with the praising of famous and authoritative individuals who came before him. He connected this not only to culture, but to nation; describing the effects of a communist ethics on his writing, versus the effects of a capitalist ethics. He felt that in learning to write in English, he was forced to adhere to a more linear, individualistic, American-style essay format that was not only foreign to him, but sometimes incomprehensible (p. 461).

Shen’s essay raised important questions about the role of students’ identities in the dynamics of learning. He described his process as one of immense struggle, and shared that he felt the necessity of formulating a new identity in and through the process of learning to write in English; how it seemed to be almost a separate self to him — at odds with his Chinese identity. Over time this shifted, and he began to see these formerly–distinct identities as simply two different aspects of himself. Eventually, he found himself embracing the code switching that came with them, and appreciating the different patterns of thought and writing he used in each language. At the close of his essay, Shen urged teachers to consider students’ cultural identities in the teaching of writing with more care and more careful lesson planning, and he challenged teachers to come up with lessons that would spare future learners some of the pain, confusion, and struggle he’d experienced.

While Fan Shen's voice matters, and he certainly raised critical questions for language and writing teachers to consider; it is my frank opinion that the work and writings by feminist women of color to define and deconstruct identity with/in language and culture is far more salient, carefully conceived of in relationship to subjectivity and the multi-dimensional dynamics of power, and useful than much of what is available in the fields of ELT, applied linguistics and SLA theory. Not coincidentally, the paradigms of dominant discourse (more specifically, the white masculine academic perspective and voice) have long dominated these fields. That is to say, I think these fields are arriving late to the game — as compared to the voluminous amounts of scholarship other fields have contributed to discussions of identity and subjectivity — and need to dig in and *work* in order to catch up.

Fan Shen's essay was an important part of the effort to create a space for that work, but recent inquiry has gone quite a bit further to explore and create awareness about *how* identity is constructed in and through language, its non-essential nature, how student and teacher identity functions in classrooms or other learning environments, and to try and push for SLA theory and applied linguistics to recognize the roles that identity and subjectivity play in language learning — especially as they relate to SLA concepts of input, affordance, and affect. Indeed, critical pedagogy (CP) is a loosely defined collective of scholarship wherein we can find cogent analyses of identity, subjectivity, gender, culture, race, power, and oppression crossing over from other academic genres and informing the work. However, CP is certainly not a part of TESOL training in majority of MA and certificate programs.

Transformational pedagogy and transformational learning are other crossover areas, but these are marginalized in the academy to the point where one rarely finds sustained or substantive attention given to them in even an exceptional TESOL program like SIT's. While

one could write volumes on these topics (and many have), I will limit myself to a mention of them in this paper — which will function as my promise to explore them further in the future — and briefly discuss a few texts within the ELT field that offer important perspectives on identity and subjectivity.

In her article published this year, *Awareness of the politics of EIL: Toward border-crossing communication in and beyond English*, Ryuko Kubota (2012) cautions against essentializing notions of identity that tend to obscure unequal power relations. Kubota completed her MA TESOL degree from SIT in 1987, and went on to get a Ph.D. in Education at the University of Toronto in 1992. She currently teaches Japanese and English at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and her work features prominently in discussions around non-native English speakers in TESOL (NNESTs). Kubota problematizes English as an International Language, and discusses the need for developing communication skills across borders of race, class, nationality, language and culture. Raising awareness of power dynamics in the field of language teaching — especially as related to racial, cultural, and linguistic identity — is an important thread running through all of Kubota’s publications and work. In this article, she suggests practical ways in which teachers and students can cultivate “border-crossing communication skills” to confront both the racist dynamics rampant in the language teaching field and the willingness “to communicate across racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class differences even if they do not share the same language (p. 64).” She gives the examples of white-only hiring practices, and students’ prejudices and ignorance in their orientation to foreign residents in their communities or language teachers based on nationality, race, and/or color. Important to note is that Kubota — and so many others in the field — are currently drawing critical connections to identity, subjectivity, de-colonial interests and the learning/using of language.

And they are all arriving at notions of identity and subjectivity similar to those of Minh-ha, Anzaldúa, and Crenshaw: it is only through cultivating an awareness — both in the teacher and the learner — of the non-essential nature of identity, and its unique positioning, experience and expression, that can one truly support the language learner (or *user* – as Cook¹⁰ has proposed).

Another important teacher-scholar's analysis of identity is Bonny Norton's. Like Kubota, she is also a prolific contributor to the collective of CP, has been a professor at UBC since 1996, and has consistently centered questions of identity and culture in her work. In her book, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity, and Educational Change*, Norton (2000) cites a 1999 essay by Kubota regarding the need to avoid essentializing discourse; "...language teachers need to go beyond simply affirming and respecting the culture of the Other and romanticizing its authentic voices," and notes that Kubota goes on to explain that teachers need to explore how cultural differences as a form of knowledge are produced and perpetuated, and how teachers can work toward social transformation (Kubota in Norton, p. 145).

Norton's book is particularly insightful in its investigation of the specific and situated ways that identity comes into play in the learning, teaching and *living* of language, which she provides examples of through sharing the experiences of her language learner case study subjects. While her research was concerned with language learners in an ESL context; her analyses of power, identity, and the learner's relationship to her target language is well-articulated and very useful to me in thinking about the way that identity is both made and unmade in language learning processes. Norton (2000) pushes at SLA's seams:

¹⁰ For a concise explanation Cook's *L2 user* instead of L2 learner, and a theoretical framework for multi-competence, see: Cook, V. (n.d.). Multi-Competence. <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/index.htm>. Personal webpage. Retrieved July 26, 2011.

I argue that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. In taking this position, I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's identity. (p.5)

What Norton is pointing to here is the relationship of identity to subjectivity. Given that coming into an awareness of my own identity through learning and exploring the language I needed to articulate it gave me the right to speech as a subject (as opposed to my continuing to exist as an object whom others defined), I can only imagine that there may be similar possibilities for my students in their learning processes with language. If a student's subjectivity is busily being erased by teachers, other students, a curriculum devoid of any discussion of (in)equalities, and/or the language itself that is being presented; the student is actively being de-humanized. And if language is a skill we learn in order to become more human (to become subjects) and to connect with other humans, a de-humanizing praxis *must* be untenable to us as teachers.

The implications of Norton's work are found to be rooted solidly in Freire's pedagogy, whose definition of situational violence below locates oppression (but does not limit it to a massive or visible kind of class war, as censors of Freire's work from mainstream departments of teacher education might contend) within relationships of dominance in the *situational*:

Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects. (Freire, 2000, p.85)

It is no doubt that if SLA theory truly looks at language in terms of how we live language, and considers the language learner in her wholeness as a subject in relationship to a world wherein

various others *may* view her more often as an object, the “affective filter” factor in language learning is transformed into something much more cogent: the language learner’s lived and perceived experiences with both systemic and situational dynamics of power.

Norton shares great insights into situated experiences of power and identity in language learning in her learner case studies. She gives specific examples of the uniquely situated negotiations of language and power that several immigrant women experienced in Canada, given their race, class, and gender experience – effectively illustrating the intersectional realities of these learners’ lived experiences. In doing so, she reveals these women’s *agency*¹¹, or *will* to learn – as the Gattegnos would phrase it (S. Gattegno, 1998).

Norton critiques the lack of understanding and incorporation of critical conceptions of identity in SLA theory, and also offers guidance to teachers. In a learner case study example I find particularly effective, she discusses how the centering of a liberal multicultural perspective in a teacher’s lesson plans isolates and shuts down learners because it effectively bulldozes through their lived experience with its avoidance of discussions of unequal power relations. She recommends a shift to lesson plans in which the learners become social scientists or ethnographers themselves, investigating their own identities and relationships to the language as an integral part of learning it, essentially de-colonizing the classroom. (Norton, p. 144)

This point is useful for me in thinking about teaching EFL writing as I reflect on my own ELT experience. I have seen a tremendous need for this kind of self-reflexive teaching and learning not only within the EFL classroom, but principally and primarily in ELT staffrooms and administrative offices, where teachers and administrators actively create the culture of the

¹¹ I use *agency* as it is often utilized in the scholarship of feminists of color, though it was developed from Pierre Bourdieu’s work. Norton also references Bourdieu throughout her book, but in the interest of keeping my paper focused, I will not address his work further.

learning environment through the ways we interact with each other, discuss our students, plan lessons and tests, discuss student errors and assessments, and set policies.

Up to this point, the ELT work I've discussed has focused mostly on understanding *learner* identity. As we know from Freire's work, a dialogue consists of two subjects, and so if we are interested in a dialogical praxis, we must also account for the identity of the teacher in the learner-teacher relationship. I also feel that there is an urgent need to account for the identity of the teacher in the teacher-*world* relationship — which I see as a loaded one with its socioeconomic, cultural, and political implications — in EFL teaching contexts. At the macro level, we need to investigate our relationships with business communities and ministries of education that set language policy. While this may sound like a formidable task to many EFL teachers, extending ourselves to this work, utilizing all of the relationships and connections we have available to us, is ultimately in the deepest interest of our learners and ourselves in a loving and reflective teaching praxis.

In claiming a right to speech as teachers who are growing a praxis of love, learning, and liberation; we need to *occupy* ELT in order to find our voices. In partnership with our students, we can use cultural expression, and all of the creativity and skills available within us, and within our networks, to reclaim education. Many of us are already doing this. Juanita Hong (2012), an English language teacher, photographer and filmmaker, and MA TESOL student in South Korea, created a short documentary this year called *Test Me: The Relationship Between TOEIC & Communicative Competence*. Her film examines the problem of standardized language proficiency testing being utilized as a gatekeeping mechanism in EFL contexts, and she hopes to expand her work into a feature-length documentary. With its inclusion of students', teachers', administrators' and business owners' voices, her film can be used to raise awareness with

ministries of education, business sector stakeholders, academicians, EL teachers, and EFL students; scattering seeds for larger changes.

While I think there are a myriad of ways that EFL teachers can contribute to much-needed changes in our field, I'll focus next on the work that must be done at home first — 'at home' meaning within ourselves as teachers and within our teaching contexts. In the next section of this paper, I'll discuss how I view the teaching of writing as a critical piece in empowering EFL language learners through a deep and loving recognition of teachers *and* learners as whole people with complex and shifting identities, and the ability of EFL teachers to facilitate the awareness of a 'right to speech' in ourselves and our students. As Freire tells us, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students." (Freire, 2000, p.72)

Section 3

On Writing Identity and Subjectivity

The Ways, the Whos, and the Whys

Learning the language of identity is like learning the meta-language of the self, of *be-ing*. We need a language to examine our identity in order to become aware of our subjectivity. And, as Freire's work is thankfully still here to remind us, we need an awareness of our subjectivity in order to be free; to be personally and politically empowered; and to relate to ourselves, others and our world with love. If we are proponents of reflective teaching, if we believe in subordinating teaching to learning, and if our goals for teaching are ultimately the three Ls (love,

learning, and liberation); we need to investigate our students' needs in the humanistic sense, we need to bring a praxis of *becoming* into our own subjectivity as teachers, and we need to investigate the values, processes and goals of the institutions in which we teach.

As EFL teachers, we are often expected (and sometimes forced) to teach writing in ways that not only ignore our students' knowledge of mother tongues and existing identities-in-language, but also hinder them from interacting with English in ways that can connect and relate with these identities. In addition, mainstream textbook approaches tend to preclude teachers from exploring our identities alongside and in dialogue with our students. The result of this is often the creation of an environment where students are flailing about in a sea of foreign rhetoric, grasping for life-rings in transition words and lexical chunks they string together over and over to the point of meaninglessness — often resorting to plagiarism because learning to write is not approached as a process of learning to *think*, but as the practice of adherence to strict rules that create a standard-looking end-product — and where teachers are forced to hold their students to unrealistic standards, expected to teach in prescriptive ways that ignore our students' actual needs, and leave us frustrated and unfulfilled in our work.

Though it may be unintentional on the part of EFL teachers, and is often a result of an enforced curriculum and assessment structure in the institutions we teach for; in the absence of self-reflexive praxis, learning is often locked out of the EFL writing classroom and left waiting in the hallway like a despondent, depressed, and misunderstood teenager. What happens inside the classroom while learning is locked out becomes a parody of education where teachers and students show up, turn pages, scribble notes on white boards and papers, and build walls around each other and our respective languages and cultures. When learning is locked out, teachers and students are engaged in an exercise that is more closely akin to behavior regulation and

conformity than it is to education. Can it be any surprise that students would dread or reject language classes that seek to regulate their behavior instead of freeing them to learn? This kind of oppressive power dynamic is all too common in EFL settings, and in the writing classroom, I argue that it is simply disastrous.

If writing is a process through which we are learning to *think*, and students are either prevented from or receive negative feedback for putting their thought process on paper — however halting, mixed up or free-form it may initially be — their only option is to erase their subjectivity from the writing process in defense of the self. When students must resign themselves to a classroom where they are not free to learn and explore, and are encouraged instead to copy whatever language and structure their teacher — or a site on the world wide web — offers as a model; we have subjected them to a dehumanizing environment.

The resultant picture in this connect-the-dots kind of writing environment is discouraging for students on emotional and personal levels, and also completely useless as a tool for creating the awareness of self necessary for language learning and for writing. In fact, a students' creativity, and thereby *learning* – could spring out of the pattern *only* if the student determines to break it at all odds; either by refusing to follow the puzzle in order, refusing to complete it at all, or adding her own dots and ignoring the ones given. In the model essay framework of teaching, this creative “acting-out” would likely earn the student a failing grade. In other words, students who actually try to engage with themselves and what they are writing in order to *think* on paper – *which is what one needs to be able to do* in order to learn to write effectively – are apt to be punished for it. In the EFL settings of today, this can mean denial at the gate of entrance to school, graduation, and/or career.

When teachers are trained (or told) only to look for a prescribed pattern, we can't see the importance in difference, innovation, and personal expression. We are blinded to the development of students' personal interlanguage, that fuzzy error-laden phase of learning that every student needs to explore in order to seek out her voice and find that critical stake in her own learning, her *will to speech*.

The question of how to invite and welcome learning into the classroom is key to any academic writing course, but it is especially urgent in the teaching of EFL writing courses. Curriculum frameworks like the use of model essays and process writing are often employed in EFL settings, but these have proven to be largely ineffective in language learning environments, where students are often struggling to simply make meaning, to make a sentence or a coherent utterance, let alone string meaningful sentences together into a coherent paragraph, or understand how to structure a longer piece.

In the process of researching to write this paper, I began reading and looking for models and examples of teaching writing *with* EFL learners that embodied the three Ls. Many of the sources I found were also MA theses or dissertations dedicated to seeking out answers to why teaching and learning writing is often such a struggle in the EFL classroom. Some papers reported on empirical research in EFL settings regarding the differences between native and non-native speaker teachers' attitudes and actual assessments regarding student errors; others conducted survey with teachers on their methods; and still others surveyed students, but paraphrased or gave only numerical results. I came to the realization that after I had discussed identity, subjectivity, and the need for learning in the writing classroom, I actually wanted to privilege EFL students' voices on the topic of learning to write.

I utilized a popular online surveying tool and created a questionnaire with a few basic questions and nine substantive questions asking learners to share their thoughts, experiences, and stories in their responses. I sent my survey to friends and colleagues who I knew were EFL learners of writing. When I read what they shared with me, I had the idea of creating kind of a reflexive dialogue within my paper between my readers (likely to be teachers) and the learners of English who shared their thoughts with me, 90% of whom are *also* EFL teachers. Woven throughout the section that follows, you will hear the voices of these EFL learners/teachers reflecting on their learning processes, advising EFL teachers as to what helped and hindered them, and sharing their thoughts about what teachers can do differently in the teaching of EFL writing. It is my hope that, in creating a dialogue within my paper between the contributors to my survey *as learners* with their own thoughts and stories *as teachers*, the insights and stories they shared will not only be helpful and interesting to the people I don't know who will read this paper, but also to my much-appreciate contributors.

Along with these voices of EFL learners/teachers I will blend in critical thoughts from an essay by Mina P. Shaughnessy and another by Mary Louise Pratt. I will also weave in a few excerpts from well known authors writing about writing in order to continually re-ground my discussion of writing in the thought-language of my paper. Hopefully, I will succeed in drawing connections between all of these voices to illustrate the importance of teaching in ways that honor and encourage the development of the identities and self-reflexive subjectivities of our students — with the knowledge that identities are formulated in and through language, and that learning a new language is always search for the self (inside a self that is *already* always searching for itself) whether it is a self-conscious search or not.

Why Writing Matters

Why do we write? Why does writing matter? Gloria Anzaldúa (1983) gave a beautiful response to these questions in her letter to third world women writers:

Why am I compelled to write? Because writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. (Anzaldúa, p. 167)

Throughout the process of writing this paper, I have rediscovered why writing matters to me. Why it is messy, and challenging. And why, when I think about it transcendently, EFL students are sometimes utterly terrified of writing.

Miranda: Listening and speaking felt easy. Writing felt difficult – yet rewarding. Writing was scary in a way, since I could see all those mistakes I made unconsciously. On the other hand, it felt great to see them disappearing after a while.

The process of writing in the subjective voice can feel like gazing intently into a mirror, and seeing ourselves, our expressions, everything we do and don't know. It's not a wonder then, that the academy has preferred the objective voice and the illusion of objectivity for so long: to write the self is *hard*. To describe the contours of our inner and outer selves on the page is one

of the most challenging things we can do with words. Because whether aware of it or not, in writing, we are iterating and creating ourselves outside of ourselves and recording it. Freezing it in time, to be read and reread, and measured for its truth. The objective vs. subjective voice debate has been raging in the academy for years, and it's far from over. Perhaps this is because seeking the balance of truth in the subjective voice can be hard for those outside of fiction writers to understand. Fiction writers are intimately familiar with this quest for a true word, a true story. They understand it because, as writers, they have to construct the subjectivity of themselves or others on the page in a way that feels *true*.

Bruna: It is hard to express who I am because it is a hard task even in my L1. Also, there are some words or expressions that are different in both languages or they simply do not exist. For example the word SAUDADE in Portuguese does not have a specific translation in English.

Mücahit: There must be a switch in our brains allowing us to jump from one language structure to another one because especially in writing the mode or the coding system jumps to intended mode itself in a very natural way. It doesn't make much of a difference in speaking but in writing the mode changes so radically.

Miranda: I think I sound more objective, and less emotional when I write in English.

Ayako: It's not same me in English. When I write Japanese, I am more poetic, I think. In English, I am more direct. I think English language is more direct than Japanese language. In English, I have to think about the word usage carefully so the communication will go smoothly, and people get the point. I haven't really written pure Japanese essays lately, but I like writing in Japanese.

Sevi: The way I would say something in English may sound weird if I try to say it in

Turkish...it won't be the way to put it in Turkish. I think word choices change for me and those word choices affect the way/manner I want to express something.

Yumi: When I was just starting to learn English, it was difficult for me to express what I was trying to say using the limited number of English words I knew, using standard grammar I was just learning. As a result, I would come up with English sentences that made absolutely no sense. I think that is part of the reason I resonated a lot with creative writing, because there was a room to adjust written English to appear similarly to written Japanese, which allowed me to express myself or my thoughts in English as closely to what I was trying to say in Japanese.

In a talk for Authors@Google, Junot Diaz, a Dominican-American writer and currently a professor of writing at MIT, talks about subjectivity and objectivity in writing:

As a writer, as an artist, what really matters to me is that a piece of art is really – in some ways, a distillation of a *single* subjectivity, interacting with – usually, a very random and bizarre collective. And, if you get the proportions wrong, you in some way erase what's important about a piece of work. If you see a piece of work only as an example of a larger collective, you've erased that person, that individual arches and whorls of the thumbprint of the artist who made it. But if you reduce (it) to just the individual, you lose the fact that this person came about in a context, yeah? You know, there is *no way* an individual makes sense without their context. (Diaz, 2007)

Diaz shares this sentiment with other writers. In her 1985 introduction to a book of her stories and poems (reprinted in Spack and Zamel's book in 1998), Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican-American writer known both for her own novels, poems, and stories, and for her long-term love with the late Adrienne Rich — also a celebrated poet and author — writes of her right to speech as a subject who makes sense only in relationship to her context:

To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a *history* sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the cane fields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification.

On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the art forms of these of our ancestors and speaking in the *patois* forbidden us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting. It means also, I think, mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose. (Cliff, 1998, p. 33)

Both Michelle Cliff and Gloria Anzaldúa talk about the mixing of language in their writing processes — in the struggle to locate their voices somewhere in the intersections of multiple languages and the complexities of race, nationality, sexuality, gender, and culture — as necessary in their search for new and creative ways to write both inside and outside of the academy in ways that felt true. There's Freire's *true word* again.

Amjad: I think it is not that difficult for me to express myself in English. In fact I find it much easier for me to talk about myself in English than in Arabic. Sometimes the words that I don't dare to say in Arabic would feel more acceptable to write in English. For example, when I wrote my autobiography in ICLT it felt more real and acceptable for me.

Sevi: For me it is very different. Although Turkish was spoken at home, I learned to write first in English and it was something I really enjoyed doing. In high school, when I moved to Turkey, I was expected to write compositions in Turkish. It was not easy for me to make this transition. Even though I knew Turkish, I was having difficulties in expressing myself both in

spoken and written Turkish. Suddenly writing took a different form and Turkish composition had become a nightmare. When writing was a form of self expression and a meditative and fun activity it now became inexpressive, like a field of meaningless and wordless chunks. It was hard to put Turkish words together and write. It felt the words did not sound right and were foreign. I handed in incomplete papers with a half start off paragraph. My pencil could not write, I did not know how to write down my thoughts. I struggled with finding words that expressed my emotions/thoughts and I couldn't seem to find an expression in this language. I stared in horror at my blank piece of paper while everyone seemed to be writing easily. I felt lost in this forced transition into expressing my ideas, myself, in Turkish. I think I spent a year in this uncertain and confused state of inexpressiveness before I was able to write something. I gradually made sense of the language as I came in contact with it through the people around me and heard how people expressed things. I grew more familiar with how this language sounds: what sounds right, what words are used to say certain things. I was writing something now, but it still wasn't the same. I didn't enjoy it and having to write in Turkish was a chore. I experienced a huge contrast between writing in English and writing in Turkish. It also felt that my strength had become my weakness. My ability had turned into an inability. All through high school, I struggled a lot and never enjoyed writing in Turkish. At my first year at university, we were all required to take a Turkish language and literature class. We were also asked to write in Turkish in this class. I still struggled writing in Turkish. So, one day I decided to do one of the writing homework in a way that would make sense to me. I first wrote in English, and then I translated what I wrote into Turkish. It was the first time in such a long time that I finally enjoyed my writing process. My teacher enjoyed reading my writing and during class she said she came across a writing that was interesting and called out my name and asked me whether I could read it out loud for

everyone. I didn't want to read it and said could I please not. She insisted so much and my friends gave me support that I had to read it. After class, people said they really liked it.

I bring the voices of EFL learners together with those celebrated authors in my paper about teaching EFL writing because I think in this dialogue, they have something incredibly valuable to show us about the interrelationship of self, writing, and story: sometimes using but also breaking with academic rhetoric through a mixing of styles, forms, genres, and languages is the only way to find the true word, the subjective voice.

Yumi: My middle school (a private boarding school) had a lot of international students and so their ESL classes were very well designed. We did have a composition class where we had to write a lot of short pieces both as homework and in class (if I remember correctly). I remember writing creative pieces a lot, and also lots of response paragraphs to reading assignments. We also occasionally did a timed writing, probably to prep ourselves for the exams to come in the future.

So far, I've seen little room for this kind of orientation to writing in EFL settings. In contexts where writing is seen as a chore to be done neatly and quickly in the interest of passing proficiency tests, writing is not free. It is not fun, open, nor empowering.

Amjad: During elementary school, we were only asked to write in response to direct questions either in test or language drills. I don't recall my teachers asking me to write something creative which involves reflections, memoirs or short stories. It was all tedious and boring writing exercises that do not measure how creative the students are, but how good they are in memorizing the grammar rules and vocabulary taken in class. In high school, there was this standardized test that determines students' enrollment to college and in that test, there was that question that asks the students to write either a letter to a friend, or just to write few

paragraphs about a general topic. I remember in that test I literally memorized the letter structure, intro and a conclusion. This question was the students' nightmare because we were not trained to write creatively at all during school. During my undergraduate degree, I remember that my instructors assumed that we were trained on writing different kinds of genres and they were asking me to write an essay about a topic that I never knew about, and I used to write English in the same way I write an Arabic essay in terms of essay structure and rules.

Fatma Dilek: ... (The) Turkish education system is unfortunately exam based and all the exams are multiple choice. Moreover, curriculum for an academic year is so intensive and teachers don't have time any extra writing or speaking activity, so I know that my teachers didn't have any chance to manage this. That's to say, I can't remember any helpful or not helpful method for writing that my teachers applied. Most probably, they didn't use anything special.

Yumi: In high school, an academic dean basically told me my English was not good enough for me to be in the advanced creative/experimental writing class. That was completely unnecessary, and if he was really trying to help students achieve their highest potential, he could have offered me alternative instead, like making sure that I have a writing tutor while enrolled in a class, etc. Especially because my school had the resource to do so, it was really hurtful to doubt my potential and most importantly, my motivation. In the end, I think I did enroll in the class, and I ended up submitting my play in a young playwright competition in NYC, gotten my poem published in a youth poetry anthology, and was approved to do an independent studies project which involved more poetry writing and a collection of prose and plays.

Too often in the EFL classroom, students' attempts to play with language(s) or break from formulaic models is a crime punishable by negative assessments, disapproval from teachers, and papers covered in red ink. In the staffrooms of several former teaching contexts, I

often witnessed teachers citing examples of students' unique interlanguages as hilarious jokes evident of a students' ignorance and stupidity, when they might view them instead as the rich and informative transcripts of students trying to make meaning.

Bruna: I vividly recall my teachers giving feedback on a paper by merely showing my final mark and the average grade of the class. By doing that I was not encouraged to go back and revise the paper. It made the process of writing a painful moment where I did not pay attention to my production - I was too worried about my final mark.

Yumi: Especially later in life, having had my paper corrected without any explanations whatsoever was simply not helpful, and was really discouraging. Not only was I left to "interpret" what the corrections meant, but also it was difficult for others to help me improve my writing according to what was necessary to meet that particular person's expectations. I think that the teachers should always go over the corrections, or make sure that the explanations are available for each correction they make.

SEVI: Things that helped: Written comments on the margins or at the end of a writing... something that they liked and why... something personal they wrote in response to my writing. Verbal feedback. Things that did not help: using too much red, marking only grammatical errors.

In an essay that takes us back to a snapshot of the conversations on academic writing in 1985, Eleanor Kutz¹² addressed a debate that had been re-opened around “Students' Right to their Own Language”, a resolution on language that was adopted by members of The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in April 1974. The CCCC is a professional organization in the U.S. that supports and promotes the teaching and study of college

¹² Eleanor Kutz is currently a professor of English at UMASS Boston. She has authored two books in the fields of teaching and literacy, respectively.

composition and communication. Of interest to me in her essay is Kutz' use of SLA theory and applied linguistics to forge a middle ground in this debate around students' right to their own language. Kutz makes a solid case for the need to assess and understand students' interlanguage in the teaching of basic writing.

The rights of students to their own language in the EFL context is *literally* about use of an interlanguage between English and another distinct national language (though the meaning of language here can also be viewed metaphorically as the language of the self – thus, *identity*). Thus, the ongoing questions around how writing should be taught in EFL contexts (my current teaching context being no exception) can be boiled down to many of same issues the CCCC was looking at in the 1970's. Time and thought overlap here in such interesting and meaningful ways. Freire's banking system metaphor finds proof in the fact that it has such applicability across time, nation, and language. Forty years after he wrote of it, we are all still struggling with how to make education a practice of freedom, how to invite learning into the classroom.

In terms of the writing classroom, I find Kutz' call for "a way of assessing students' entering language skills, measuring their progress, and evaluating their final writing" (p. 391) to be one of the most critical needs in EFL contexts. There are a few reasons for this. One is that the kinds of assessments required by English departments, testing agencies, and/or schools are what ultimately inhibit teachers from effectively teaching our students to write. The other reason is one I will discuss in my letter to EFL teachers, which is the identity of the teacher who is assessing students' work. Kutz argues that assessment needs to respond to student's errors as evidence of the development of language.

Yumi: The most meaningful & effective experience of learning how to write was going over my writing with an evaluator (teacher, tutor, etc.). Sometimes, just having your paper

corrected is not enough to learn. It's best to have the evaluator tell me "why" and "how" my writing was corrected so that I could understand the corrections. It was not enough to merely "rewrite" the paper with corrections made by the evaluator. This method was used in writing centers at universities where I've attended, both at undergraduate and graduate levels as well.

Bruna: I liked the teachers that gave me a personal feedback - written or orally. It did not work for me when the teachers only circled my mistakes.

Sevi: (-) I don't think I appreciated my teacher writing in red on my paper in high school. (+) I think it was encouraging when teachers asked us to read out loud what we wrote. I appreciated verbal feedback when teachers told me why they liked my writing. I also felt motivated when they wrote a comment at the end of my writing. It was interesting to read something thoughtful the teacher had written about my writing.

Amjad: I think that my teachers should have spent more time to make me write freely with no pressure of writing everything in proper grammar and spelling. I think they should have made some time for reflective and creative writing in and outside the classroom. I think they should have made it clear for me that writing in English is different from writing in Arabic; this could have been done through showing me different writings in both language and asked me to notice the differences and work on changing the way I used to write before.

Kutz (1986) explains the need for better methods of assessing students' writing in the following statements:

"...to look down from a pinnacle of generically appropriate, elaborated, and wholly standard academic discourse to the valley of students' present language use is to...discount all we know about language acquisition and style-shifting. Our standards for perfect or "A" papers of whatever format must not provide the measure. We need

instead an assessment tool that allows us to see and appreciate the extensive language competencies our students, however basic their writing skills, bring to our classrooms, and that helps us focus on the development of new competencies rather than on what they do not yet know.” (pp. 391-392, emphasis mine)

Language teachers need to borrow back the ideas that Kutz borrowed from us. How can we claim to teach language and writing if we don’t critically examine *how* we are assessing the language learning of our students in and through their writing; if we discount as irrelevant their experiences with self, language, and learning in their mother-tongue(s) that students bring with them to the language classroom; if we do not support students’ self-empowerment in the learning process; and instead, focus merely on whether their muffins do or do not pop out perfectly from the rhetorical tin that we’ve given them to use?¹³ When we do manage to find ways to teach that subordinate teaching to learning, and enable our students as subjects; how can we justify it if our assessment measures (or those of the department in which we teach) are not in line with this goal, and our students are ultimately awarded failing grades for their efforts, or submitted to tests that don’t measure their actual learning? I will try to address this question in the next section of my paper, but I think the answer is really another question: can language teachers come together and create changes in the way that our learners experience assessment on the level of departments, educational committees, and government agencies/ministries?

Kutz offers useful good pointers in her article for initiating the kind of awareness that Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy calls for. She points out that this can begin with students’ own stories, then move to other’s stories, and then come back to their own. Many mainstream teachers have used Anne Frank’s diary in this way, but alternatively, EFL teachers can seek out

¹³ The muffin tin metaphor is borrowed from Ann Berthoff’s 1984 Essay, *Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning*. (p. 744).

other texts with similar qualities, using our own critical thinking skills to find a work that students in a particular context might be responsive to. Kutz (1986) explains this framework for developing students writing skills, and effectively makes a case:

Within individual sections of basic writing courses I have built on the generic strengths that students bring with their oral language, particularly their use of narrative, not simply to begin with what is "easiest," as composition texts based on rhetorical modes have done, but to begin where most students already show significant competence and to show them how that competence can be extended and applied to academic writing.

After telling of an incident from their own early life experiences, they read *The Diary of a Young Girl* and see that Anne Frank tells about particular events in her life, that something makes them significant. They begin to use evidence from the diary to support hypotheses about Anne's development and values. (p. 390)

Kutz relates how, after having described their own experience, and then "reading" Anne's life, students use evidence from the diary to interpret it and see it within a framework that makes it meaningful;

they begin to conceive of a framework of their own, to see what gives their own lives meaning, what has made them see particular events that they have told about as significant. They begin to practice the kind of critical perspective on their own lives that Freire (and Bizzell and Berthoff) see as a fundamental value of formal education. (p. 391)

This points to the power of the subjective narrative in the learning process.

Sevi: (Teachers) could have engaged us in more creative ways/activities to write/express/explore ourselves.

Fatma Dilek: (Teachers) could have realized that English is not just grammar.

Mücahit: I would have focused more in writing short stories and asked their support more for it.

Amjad: (Teachers) focused much on grammar and spelling and that helped to improve my grammatical competence, but they did not improve my productive, reflective and creative skills.

Miranda: They could have taught us more creative ways of writing.

Using subjective narratives to teach writing in the manner Kutz describes can also help students toward an awareness that everything in its own way is a 'story'; that many things we are supposed to take for granted as “history” or “fact” are *stories* that another person just as human as they are created; and that we are unconsciously acquiring ideas and frameworks from these 'stories' — that direct us to look at ourselves and the world all around us in particular ways — all the time.

As Shakti and Caleb Gattegno assert, children are innately able to be aware and to direct their own learning through that awareness. But this ability is often damaged once they enter the classroom, where they are taught to ignore their awareness and focus on memorizing the ‘correct answers’ or ‘facts’ that someone else provides for them. (S. Gattegno, 1998)

Junot Diaz remembers his own awareness as a child, and talks about how this initiated his desire to write:

As a kid, I was really observant and there was a part of me that felt that there was this vacuum in the historical record. I would turn on the TV and all these things that I saw happening at once, nobody was talking about. And so, of course, there was this desire to bear witness... I felt like I was seeing shit that nobody wanted to talk about. And there

was this desire in me to know that, and that was part of my writing. (Diaz, Authors@Google, September 26, 2007)

From his perspective as a published and acclaimed writer, Diaz is now deeply knowledgeable about the colonial history that lives on in its post-colonial manifestations of inequality and its conceptions of identity that were propagated through the oppressive political, personal, and socio-economic violence of colonization, which have left their traces on the internal *and* external landscapes of Dominican people. But it was in becoming aware of his desire to know that Diaz learned to write — and learned about history in the process. In other words, it was Diaz' need to know (awareness) that pushed him to write: so, it was through the process of inquiry (thinking) and writing (right/will to speech) that he learned history (knowledge). If we believe in education as the practice of freedom, it is our role as teachers to encourage and support the educable awareness in our students, and to do all that we can to re-kindle that innate desire to understand the world that children are born with in order to humanize and appreciate our students as growing, struggling, thinking people. But this cannot be done from behind a screen of unapproachable authority. Teachers must view ourselves as humans in the dynamic as well. Our students need us to be *with* them in the classroom, not towering over them, hiding behind our desks, or cloaking who we are in the removed and distant objective mores of the academy.

In my opening section, I shared that I would be remiss not to acknowledge the implications of being a U.S. citizen native speaker English teacher in foreign language contexts where English is not considered one of the primary languages — and to add to that, in places where the learning of English is seen as stepping stone to greater status. In addition, as a blonde, blue-eyed, female who looks fairly feminine, probably heterosexual, and fairly physically fit; I project back exactly the stereotypical image that private language teaching businesses and

learners in many countries have associated with learning English from a native speaker — a white face, a white-toothed smile, and that distinctively American ‘vibe’ of confidence and optimism that seems to be part of my aura whether I like it or not. Short of drastic intervention in my appearance, I can’t change these physical factors much, nor can I instantly blend seamlessly into a culture I haven’t spent time with. So, what I have to do instead is to try and connect with students — and help them connect with me — within both the real *and* perceived borders of difference, through engaging them in dialogue. I say “within” instead of “across” intentionally.

The space wherein my students and I, along with our materials and ideas; the expectations of our English department or institution; our respective languages; and our identities and needs come together might be conceived of by Mary Louise Pratt¹⁴ as a bona fide “contact zone.” In her 1991 essay, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, (reprinted in 1998 in Spack & Zamel) she grounded her exploration of identity, colonial history, writing, and language in the discussion of an historical text written by a Peruvian man named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala in 1613 — a 1200 page letter written to King Phillip III of Spain (though it never reached Spain and ended up in the Danish Royal archive, to be unearthed again in 1908) in a mixture of ungrammatical Spanish and Quechua called, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*. Engaging some of the history and the analyses of this incredible text, Pratt (1998) shares her thoughts about literacy and writing in what she likes to call “the *contact zones*”, which she uses to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of

¹⁴ Mary Louise Pratt is a Silver Professor, as well as Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, Spanish & Portuguese, and Comparative Literature and Chair of Social and Cultural Analysis of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures at New York University. Her writings have made important contributions to the field of Critical Theory.

highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 173).

To quickly summarize what Pratt identifies as the arts of the contact zone, (without endeavoring here to unpack her incredibly dense essay, which would add an entirely new layer, genre, and another 20 pages to this paper) I’ll quote her summary of them: “Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression - these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone.”(p.179) I would submit multi-lingualism as an addition to her list. She ends her article with another version of this list, adding to it;

“ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories), ways to move into *and out of* rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*.” (Pratt, 1998, p.184)

In acknowledging my very *classroom* as a kind of contact zone, I hold myself responsible to true words, and to an awareness of my own subjectivity as I engage, connect, and learn *with* my students.

While Pratt’s essay was ultimately concerned with a call to discussion of modern *U.S.* contact zones, her analyses (of these “arts of the contact zone”, with their rootedness in and critical awareness of anthropology and its loaded colonial history) provide critical concepts and a terminology that I find to be effective in attempting to describe the complexity of what EFL learners and teachers are negotiating — whether the teachers are native speakers or not. I would contend that by virtue of the fact that the language being taught is English, and that the students

learning it are in an EFL setting that does not feature English as one of its primary languages; the ingredients necessary to a contact zone are already present. The cultural and linguistic background and the identity of the teacher are *additional ingredients* that — while they do matter, and can/do change the classroom dynamic — are *not* the initial determining factor in the definition of the EFL classroom as contact zone, as I have often heard both native and non-native English speaking teachers claim. To make such a claim is to conflate nationality and mother-tongue with one's pedagogy and personal politics — a claim that begins to unravel when the realities of teachers in EFL settings are observed.

In her 1976 essay (reprinted in *College English* in 1998), *Diving In: An introduction to Basic Writing*, the late Mina P. Shaughnessy¹⁵ critiqued the kinds of colonial attitudes teachers may unwittingly bring into the basic/remedial writing class. In an analysis critical of the gatekeeping backlash in the historically white and male spaces of the academy, she described four stages a basic writing teacher might go through, from the first stage she called, “guarding the tower” wherein the teacher eyes the students suspiciously, applying stereotypes and assumptions in an effort to guard entrance to the elite world of the academy, judging the student's success as impossible after collecting their initial pieces of writing; to the second stage she called “converting the natives”, wherein the teacher has gradually begun to see that a few of the students errors are actually efforts to make meaning that show their intelligence; to a third stage Shaughnessy called, “sounding the depths,” in which the teacher begins to question the sense in his/her own presumption of the simplicity of the academic frameworks the students are struggling with, realizing that “the grammar and rhetoric of formal written English have been

¹⁵ Mina P. Shaughnessy, (1924–1978) was a professor and scholar dedicated to teaching basic writing in a way that empowered her students. She began her career first as an editor at McGraw-Hill publishers, and then went on to teach at Hunter College, Hofstra, and for many years in the CUNY system, as Director of CUNY's SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program.

shaped by the irrationalities of history and habit and by the peculiar restrictions and rituals that come from putting words on paper” (p. 4), and now becomes a careful observer of the self, in addition to the students and their writing. But it’s Mina’s fourth stage, which she called, “Diving In” that I want to highlight in terms of teachers cultivating an educable awareness in *ourselves*. She says of this stage:

The teacher who has come this far must now make a decision that demands professional courage - *the decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence.* "Always assume," wrote Leo Strauss to the teacher, "that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart." This assumption, as I have been trying to suggest, does not come easily or naturally when the teacher is a college teacher and the young men and women in his class are labeled remedial. (Shaughnessy, 1998, p. 7, emphasis mine)

We might replace the words “labeled remedial” in this passage with the words “EFL learners” to come up with a powerful reminder to EFL teachers of writing. And it is Shaughnessy’s choice of phrasing, that teachers must *make “the decision to remediate” ourselves* that is particularly resonant for teachers of language.

In my own experience as a language learner of Spanish, Chinese, and now Turkish, I recognize that in the work of making meaning in a new language; I must be almost egoless, child-like, completely open, and aware that I am searching for meaning in order to learn. This indicates to me that in the teaching of language, I must remediate myself to the space and experience of the learner in order to understand what is needed for their learning.

Practicing this in an EFL writing context that is, in many ways, a “contact zone” is a matter of cultivating awareness through the sharing of stories, the telling of selves, and supporting the students’ search for identity in and through language in a way that empowers them to learn, and to become. When teachers continue to be aware of our own process of becoming in this context, we create the conditions for dialogue, for the true word, for love. And ours do indeed become the arts of the contact zone.

Section 4

A Love letter to EFL Writing Teachers

My dear colleagues;

I want to write a love letter to you.

I am inspired to write this letter by a tradition in my MA program. The students wrote letters to ourselves, addressed them, and put them in sealed envelopes. Our program Director mailed them to us about 6 months later, when we were residing back in our various teaching contexts around the globe. It was a pretty special way of learning about ourselves. That’s the power of writing, right?

There are so many great ways to learn, to reflect on ourselves, and to reflect on our teaching. As I researched for my MA thesis, some of you shared your reflections with me about learning to write. Most of you wrote to me afterward that it felt really nice to think about your *own* learning processes, since most of you now hold roles primarily as teachers of English, or as professionals who use English as your main mode of work and communication in your fields.

For those reading this who didn't fill out my survey, that's OK! It doesn't even matter whether you're an EFL teacher/learner, and ESL teacher/learner, a dishwasher, a nanny or a law professor: you can still do it. I'm going to include some questions below. Take your time thinking about and answering them, and try to pay attention to any feelings or memories that come to you before you start writing. Then, be as verbose as you want to be! For extra fun reflection, find another person or group of people to do the survey, too, and then share your reflections with each other!

Questions:

How do you feel about writing?

Looking back, what are your memories of learning to write?

Were there some things your teacher(s) did that helped you learn? Was there anything your teacher(s) did that was not helpful to you?

Do you feel that you express *who you are* in your (second or additional language) writing?

Is it different or similar to the way you express yourself in your primary language? How?

If you could go back in time, is there anything you wish your teacher could have done differently to help you learn to write?

Maybe you're thinking, this is a *love* letter? Giving me a bunch of questions to ask myself? My answer is yes, yes, and so very much YES!

Do you remember reading about my zombie dream at the beginning of my paper? As I wrote that dream down, I remembered a conversation I had with a colleague as we walked across campus, finished teaching our classes for the day. I can't remember everything we said, but I do remember that the conversation trailed off something like this:

“I mean, look at this! It’s like a fogged in place. Everyone is walking around like a bunch of zombies! Zombie teachers, zombie students, zombie curriculum...” I exclaimed in frustration, throwing up my arms for emphasis.

“Zombie-land,” my colleague nodded in agreement, and we shook our heads at the waste of it.

So, how do EFL classrooms come to look like zombie lands? And what do I even *mean* by that?

Well, let me put it this way: when you go to the sink and brush your teeth, do you think about the way you raise your arm, then hand, and grasp your toothbrush? Do you notice and observe your other arm move and pick up the toothpaste, and then watch and feel the whole process as you bring both objects together and put the paste on your brush, and so on? No way. It’s a routine, with automated movements and habitual regularity. Yeah, OK, Jessmaya, and *what* does that have to do with zombies?

Everything.

Now, if — the next time you brush your teeth — you slow down and try to notice all of the different movements you make in the process, paying attention to which muscles are used, how they feel, and how you hold your brush and paste, you may find it to be *completely different* from what you do every other day. You may find that brushing your teeth becomes — as long as maintain awareness of all of your movements — a real *experience*. Perhaps you’ll notice the taste of the toothpaste, the feel of your gums, the sound and the amount of pressure you apply to the brush as it scrubs your teeth. Paying attention, noticing even the simplest of the things we do, changes them into experiences because we are aware, and we are suddenly making active choices instead of automated movements. This is also called mindfulness.

For far too many of us in EFL contexts, teaching (and learning) is expected to be just as routine as brushing our teeth. We are expected by our employers to enter the classroom, fill our students' disembodied brains with knowledge from a required textbook, test them, note all of their errors in red, and - as one past department head with a particularly overt neo-colonial attitude was fond of putting it in staff meetings - "shove it (English) down their throats" on a daily basis. The violence and oppression of this kind of a culture at a school leads to the development of zombie students, zombie teachers, and zombie curriculum. *However, it is the extent to which we decide to experience each day of teaching and learning WITH our students, and the commitment we bring to paying attention to ourselves and what we are doing in the classroom with our students, that we are able to snap out of what can feel like the zombie land realities of EFL settings.*

Like the woman's voice in my dream advised; "...what people don't realize is that zombies are actually a psychosocial phenomenon entirely based upon fear and belief. Being bitten by a zombie doesn't make you a zombie at all, people simply *believe* it does, so they become zombies. But they could snap out of this at any moment if they knew! If people had this information..."

So...

What if I, gathering up my courage and trusting the true word in that voice, come out of the small glass-walled and doored room I've been locked away in with one dragon head (we'll call it by the name of *Love*), and you round up that other dragon head (we'll call it by the name of *Learning*), and we'll go ahead and make our way together through the fray in the quad and across the school, where we'll at last reunite the dragon heads with their body (which we'll call *Liberation*).

I promise, though it may be scary at first, and there'll be a lot of reflection going on - for us *and* for our students; it will feel *amazing*, and it will be truly transformative.

What do you say? Meet me?

Ever your colleague in Love, Learning, and Liberation,

Jessmaya

Section 5

Conclusion

As I dove into researching for this paper, it literally felt like peeling an onion, one pungent, juicy layer after another, except that the onion seemed to be an ever-widening unending spiral shape. Each of the ideas, articles, books, blog posts, studies, and responses to my survey was a point of entry to yet another layer. The more layers I became aware of, the more mind-boggling this onion seemed to become. As many of us experience when peeling an onion layer by layer, I wanted to cry! I wanted to put it down and wash my hands of it. After weeks of this seemingly never-ending reading and searching, I began to feel too overwhelmed to write, to feel inadequate and unprepared for the task of writing about writing. And it turned out, *that* was perfect.

While explaining to a friend that perhaps I just needed to give up, or take more time, I recognized that this mind-boggling sense of all the things I wanted to continue to learn more about was — in and of itself — the whole point!

As Caleb Gattegno asserts, “Only awareness is educable.” The awareness of my own process of writing that I found as I worked on this paper reiterates to me that which underlies all of the reading, thinking and research I’ve described here: it is only through the search and discovery of all that we still want to learn that we can become better teachers and learners. Becoming aware of all that we don’t know, and want to know, is the essence of learning.

In the self-reflexive process of writing this paper, I find that what is challenging about writing for me is not so different from what challenges my EFL students in their writing. We have to *think* in order to write, and in doing so, we are directly confronted with everything we know and don’t know. Much like a mirror, what we put on the page is always a reflection of where we are, how we are, and who we are. This is our subjectivity, our identity, and our key to the three Ls in our own lives.

Just like my process writing this paper, our EFL learners or users or doers or whatever they’d like to name themselves are creating and created in this mirroring of themselves on the page. As teachers who are dedicated to love, learning, and liberation in education, we must work to create classrooms, departments, schools, communities, cities, nations, and eventually a world where we can be *and become* ourselves.

With each other.

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APPENDIX A

I've created an example of **context** as a set of concentric circles similar to those presented in Beverly Burkett's Class, *Approaches to Teaching Language* at SIT Graduate Institute, July, 2011.

