

Teacher Power Dynamics in Memoir-Writing Unit

by Amanda Stessen-Blevins

Background

The sensitive history of the spread of English is as important as the explicit language concepts we teach. Some postcolonial critics view the current spread of English as an indication that cultural stereotypes and racism have been perpetuated (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Said, 1978). Other researchers view the spread of English as a current global and economic reality (Lok, 2012). Pennycook (1999, p. 346) stated that “English” and “teaching” are two words central to today’s biggest educational, cultural, and political concerns.

In primary and secondary schools in the United States, this culture of power related to postcolonial theories is still evident. Language has been acknowledged as being where power is formed, performed, and tied to identity by race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Bourdieu, 1991; Delpit, 1988). Issues related to power dynamics in the classroom are implicitly present in each lesson we plan, perform, and reflect. Taking these ideas into consideration is just as important as what we teach explicitly.

In traditionally art-based professions, such as music or painting, there is the concept of *silence*. In music, rests that indicate silences are just as important as played notes. Similarly, in painting, what is not painted is of equal importance to what is on the canvas.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the importance of students’ silences in light of what they say and do in the TESOL classroom. The everyday interactions described in the complex history of this field are of equal importance to the everyday language and content objectives. This paper considers this history, using its information to alter the traditional classroom power dynamics in a third-grade memoir-writing unit.

Altering the Power Dynamics

One of the most common school writing assignments is memoir writing, or personal narrative. Students are asked to share stories and relate to others’ stories even when they may be uncomfortable doing so. Consider the college admissions essay, which asks students to position themselves in not-so-positive lights and end with what they learned from their experiences. These may be episodes that are quite personal to share with complete strangers, who will then determine the story “worthy.” Most students are silent about this power dynamic, a silence that tells us much about how they are positioned by this exercise.

I decided to take on this silence in an after-school creative writing program. A colleague and I facilitated this project at a public elementary school in Brooklyn, N.Y. The project included 11 students—10 ranging from intermediate to proficient English language learners and one native English speaker. We met in the spring of 2014 for eight brief sessions, and chose to write memoirs because students were already familiar with the personal narrative genre. To address power issues inherent in such assignments, we decided to invite students to choose how they would present their work. Because the program was ungraded and after school, we eliminated other power imbalances caused by grading.

In the first week, we read a mentor text, *Thunder Cake* by Patricia Polacco. I chose this book for three reasons: students were familiar with Polacco’s beautiful stories; it’s a memoir, with the author represented by the main character, who shares a memory; the language is sprinkled with Russian words. I wanted an implicit example of how students can incorporate

other languages into English writing. During this week, students brainstormed, drafted, and discussed how they could create a portion of an anthology drawing on some of these features.

In the second week, students rehearsed and elaborated on their writing. As one student said, “Then we rehearsed with a partner. This brings the story to life, so we know how our story will go and you don’t make a bunch of mistakes. This way, you can remember what you’re supposed to say.”

In the third week, students revised, edited, and published. Because they were English language learners, I did not expect them to peer edit by knowing whether something “sounds right”—but peer editing helps familiarize students with audience. Students typed their drafts on laptops, with many completing between four and 10; they seemed more willing to edit to suit their audience when it meant they didn’t have to rewrite their work completely.

In week 4, we formed two committees to plan a writing celebration: set-up/clean-up and welcoming committees. By this time, my co-teacher and I had become facilitators, with students in charge of festivities and eager to share their work. The committees wrote invitations; organized food, drinks; and decorations, and created welcome signs in English, Chinese, and Arabic. They also decided that we needed goodie bags to thank people for coming. On the afternoon of the celebration, they wrote and performed a welcome speech, written in English and translated by them into Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic for their families. They read or acted their memoirs. The celebration culminated with students signing their published books.

Conclusion

This memoir-writing project exemplifies how we, as TESOL professionals, can alter the power dynamics in our classrooms. Being aware of power structures related to language and social status allows us to organize instruction that puts students in charge, while we take the role of classroom facilitators. Students can have more ownership over writing tasks that traditionally have silenced them when they have greater opportunities to control how their stories are shared.

References

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