

INTER-CULTURAL RHETORIC AND TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS IN A COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSE

Rebecca Shapiro

Teaching undergraduates the literature of another place or time can seem like teaching a foreign language because there is so much to explain and contextualize—and today teaching writing and literature presents special challenges where I am employed, in the City University of New York system, which serves mostly ethnic minorities and graduates of the New York City schools, for while most of our courses are not officially ESOL, in practice they are. Most students are immigrants themselves, or they are Generation 1.5 and have grown up with another language as an L1, so before I can teach literature or writing in English, I sometimes must start with the most basic of basic grammar checks.¹ To achieve learning objectives in my Composition for Literature course I add to traditional methods of teaching writing such as invention, drafting, revision, and peer editing. I also use pedagogical interventions that strengthen written and oral language skills and approach writing weaknesses in an innovative, even disruptive, manner that take advantage of my students' special language abilities. My experiences suggest useful classroom techniques for improving writing through the experience of listening to readings of literary texts. In this paper I explore how the application of linguistic concepts—particularly those from sociolinguistics—challenges and strengthens students' critical thinking and academic skills in my first-year writing courses. When I design classroom activities and assignments that expose linguistic context and make the words and work more relevant, students can connect what they read and write about with their own language and linguistic experiences to clarify the writing processes. These activities can be easily adapted for use in other teaching environments.

Recently, I asked students in two writing courses to recount their experiences of being read to as children and many revealed that their parents had not read to them much, if at all. Because I remembered the pleasure of my parents and teachers reading aloud and because active listening is an essential element in language learning, I

added listening and speaking to the reading and writing course components. I read a novel aloud for the first fifteen minutes of each period to give students the sheer pleasure of listening with no assessment, hoping that students would enjoy the experience and learn by active listening and modelling; I intended this addition to spark discussion about creative language use and then guide students to apply what they learned to their essays. The book was challenging but not “boring”—my students claim many books bore them—and also outside students' cultural and literary experience. To employ engaging and current lexicon and syntax, I chose Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* (2001) because it remains topical, irreverent, and linguistically complex. Set in a gentrifying area of London, its plot parallels the lives of many of my students in Brooklyn where people from vastly disparate social classes and ethnic groups interact with each other but do not have relationships. Briefly, *How to Be Good* is about the complications when Katie, a physician, has an affair and her journalist husband David questions their comfortable life after meeting an eccentric healer. Acting upon new anti-materialist values, David gives away the family's “extras”: money in Katie's wallet to a beggar, a computer to a women's shelter, Sunday roast to a homeless shelter, a spare bedroom to a runaway teen. Discord and hilarity ensue. David disrupts the family's finances and, more importantly, challenges the moral compass of the middle-class, white, liberal characters. For my students, the language was unfamiliar, as was much of the plot. The difficulties of this fictional family were foreign because they themselves did not have extras to give away and these differences were important to expose and explain. It was the inevitable “teachable moment” for me when my students laughed at Hornby's representation of David and the irony of people accumulating belongings only to dispense with them, because when my students or their parents came to the United States, they usually had very little anyway. Likewise, once we started to hear the language of literature, it was obvious that we needed to dissect it and make it meaningful again. I had assumed too much by my students but once we got involved in this project, I

¹ For a discussion and comparison of different kinds of ELLs, see Doolan (2013).

perceived surprising changes by the end of the term. While it has not been possible to measure explicitly results in student writing after reading to them, such spontaneous additions to my teaching repertoire have made me aware of the necessity of teaching writing differently; and “resetting” the course shows students that I am comfortable questioning my own authority.

One aspect of writing that I teach, regardless of the course, is register and the relationship between power and the politics of language; so when students wanted to write about Hornby’s novel rather than the “real” low-stakes writing assignment in which they isolated specific and troubling cultural codes or language in the assigned readings, I saw an opportunity to use a text that runs the gamut of registers. Thus, I allowed them to link *How to be Good* to their other work. As students became attached to the compelling plot and humour of the novel, especially the class struggle, I supported their engagement. Active listening became active reading and writing. Such exercises encourage academic communicative competence, building vocabulary and grammar, and exploring various environments in which to apply different linguistic rules. Once students explored why a character did something or why something occurred in the novel, I asked them to consider a more explicit connection to their audience and to write using meta-language. This can be a mechanical or artificial exercise but after we explored their feelings of disconnect with the Englishness of the novel and after I began to “translate” they understood what Kurt Vonnegut meant when he observed that authors should “Pity the reader.” Thus, students were receptive when I asked them to add rhetorical markers such as “what this means is...” and “this is important because...” As they drafted, they attended to distinctions between their experiences and those of the characters in the readings, guiding their audiences toward a conclusion and acknowledging their formal register.

One of the most challenging pedagogical tasks in a writing class is to get students to explain *why* something is—whatever *it* is—so I was gratified when students explored why they did not understand something in the novel. Initially, they found Hornby’s content and language ambiguous but writing about and then discussing it clarified issues for them, thus leading them to question themes or language in other readings. Because I ask students to consider what Emily Dickinson would say is “slant” or odd about a text, low-stakes writing assignments asked students to focus

on something strange—and explain away the strangeness. Students could focus on a sentence, a quote, an episode, or even a word and then address how their choice reflects a larger idea or theme. For example, in contrast to Hornby’s David who seems to want to move down in the world, in a short story a professor who has moved up and is returning to Africa after being educated in England. He is described as being *escorted* by a taxi driver who has essential knowledge of the city in ways the narrator does not. Students were aware of the class distinctions between the main character who “talks white” and his driver, who employs an African-inflected variety of English and they also know how it is to return “home” and be seen as having risen in the world while simultaneously feeling inferior in the United States. I saw that the text that I believed would be used for pleasure became an essential curricular tool. I used the novel as a guide to make other texts less “foreign” and more comprehensible. In this way, “talking white” became a starting place for an assignment and once we put other parts together with the meta-linguistic devices, explanations and analysis became easier to produce.

In addition to employing such conventional composition activities as discussion, drafting, and revision I added analogy to pre-writing and invention. Analogy assists students in understanding what something is by clarifying what it is not, and I created relationships among different words or ideas to familiarize the foreign—the Englishness² of Hornby and the discourse of academic writing. I situated the reading within familiar social and political contexts and then compared it to what it was not. For instance, many students lacked health insurance and relied on emergency or clinic services subsidized by New York State or city programs. Moreover, when dealing with medical providers, many must interpret for their parents—this phenomenon has been observed often and Leki, Cumming, and Silva cite several others (2008: 20). My students understand physicians in the United States to be economically and socially elite so when they learned that Hornby’s character Katie, the physician, is a government employee they were shocked, but by seeing the opposite of their experience, students could understand that they needed to explain more as well, as clearly, not everyone has the same experiences. When I have defined by opposition, I show rather than tell why

² I mean the country and speakers of England, not the language.

specific and relevant examples are necessary in argumentation. I explain that disagreeing and writing about contrasts make for stronger student drafts because when students engage with difference, they must engage with multiple sides. Thus, *How to Be Good* gave me an opportunity to take student ignorance of another culture and give a lesson on effective argument and anticipating opposition.

Applying Ulla Connor's idea of "inter-cultural rhetoric" (2004) can give teachers the ability to help students see the productivity of language and classroom activities. I employed inter-cultural rhetoric when foregrounding specific aspects of language to illustrate how it works: we might discuss the morphology of an English word and how its Latin root is related to Spanish, Creole, or Patois so students can shine as class experts. Similarly, word formation, taboo language, semantics, linguistic imperialism and other aspects of sociolinguistics challenge and reinforce existing language skills that students can adapt in their work. Engaging with the language and rhetorical patterns of other cultures leads to improved critical thinking skills, which in turn results in increased creativity in students' writing, even as they sometimes claim to want only one answer or to be told what is correct. When we teachers forgo prescriptivism, we deny easy answers and rules and instead we show language in use, an authentic and meaningful experience. While students must know that for society to work it must be rule-governed, exploring alternatives to the norm are essential to make a reader or interlocutor stop and take note. My classroom discussions focused on using the "best" word instead of many words, or using vulgarity when appropriate, just as I have introduced the concept of registers and why we choose one and not another. First, we discuss and then we draft, but usually the two are practiced simultaneously and what follows are several examples of how we use inter-cultural rhetoric.

In every course it is important to teach grammar, the building blocks of good sentences, but I introduce morphology and syntax, as even the mere word *grammar* unsettles students; if they learn the same ideas without the baggage, then so much the better to make English fun and relevant. Take, for instance, infixing: the best-known American example is the adjective *un-fucking-believable*, while the British English *abso-bloody-lutely* occurs in Hornby's novel. By disambiguating words and their constituents, I move on to semantic relativity, for *fuck* and *bloody* are roughly equivalent as emphatic, transgressive intensifiers. After a daily reading when we broke down *abso-*

bloody-lutely we discussed other kinds of word-formation: compounding (*house-husband*), clipping (*maths* from *mathematics*), and blending (*motel* from *motor* and *hotel*). A blending particularly pleasing to students is when two of Hornby's characters indulge in an extensive catalogue of known *fuckwits*. This is not an idle exercise, as teaching vocabulary is not just entertaining but very useful as a means to learn about other cultures and languages: on several days I opened the dictionary, read a word, and then students defined it based on their knowledge of morphology. International students helped native-born students, as they typically know our grammar better than we do and this lexicographical exercise was extended as I challenged students to choose an unfamiliar "hard" word and use it correctly in their papers. Their job was to make it impossible to find, mine was to find it; *bamboozle* was memorable, though certainly not hidden. The point of these activities is to show students that sounds, words, and meaning are mutable—and once dissected, it is easier to use them with confidence.

Another linguistic lesson involved working out the place and purpose of sensitive or profane terms. My students could not comprehend *sod*, as when one character observes that her husband "has a loyal and loving and—sod it—a not unattractive or unintelligent wife." In the United States *sod* lacks that sense, though most Americans know what a *sodomite* is. In this context, *sod it* is an expletive phrase—*damn it* intensified. Other usages in *How to be Good* surprised students, as a character describes the difficulty of rousing another's interest in old pursuits of insulting the stupid or boring in society: "Nigel has just ended his attempt to attract David's attention with a volley of abuse. He even used the c-word, although we all pretended we hadn't heard it" (78). My intention of introducing vulgarity is to acknowledge that language is both arbitrary but also political, and that we decide there are degrees of offensiveness depending on context or environment. We know why one term is "worse" than another and while arbitrariness in language can be challenging or uncomfortable to students the discussion becomes effective when we analyse who can say what word and to whom—what are the conditions and environments that make a word take on meaning. Granting or having permission relates to context as well, though that permission can be revoked or even denied based on group membership. This lesson was reinforced when I reminded them that *sod* had been merely a sound without meaning before our discussion, and thus they came to understand why a student from

Africa did not—could not—understand fully why *nigger* is so distressing and offensive to those born in the United States.

A teacher can destabilize the presumption that there is one correct language and free students to make choices about how it is political. Having students list and rate profanities is an effective method of teaching language and power, as we give or deny words power when we understand meaning and etymology. To students, the most heinous word in American is *nigger* (when used by a white person), followed by *cunt* (see works passim by Kennedy 2002; Naylor 1986)—and the third is *fuck*—these taboo words are of great interest when studied academically rather than discussed casually as most students will not publicly utter *cunt* and they are surprised that the English sense is less odious than the American version. Asking students to rank the “awfulness” of words, then, has been useful as it introduces synchronic and diachronic semantics and reinforces the idea of relativity. While students thus understand that *nigger* is “very bad,” they are initially unclear as to *why* it is so or *who* can use it, and under what conditions (I, for example, can only use it with permission in the classroom.). We considered that *nigger* and *nigga* are in fact two senses of the same word, moving the argument into greater nuance. A teacher willing to cede authority can take advantage of student knowledge of slang as we address as a group the historic importance of the word and all of its senses and connotations. An example of this is when a class has both African-American and African students discussing their relationship to the word and how it does or does not apply to them. An example of such language awareness has helped me expand my repertoire of questions for students but also writing assignments. Here is a question from a recent exam and a student’s excellent answer:

Q. What are some reasons I, Dr. Shapiro, typically would be unable to use African American Vernacular English? Under what conditions might there be exceptions? If I *did* use AAVE, would my language be marked or unmarked?

A. You are not African-American, you weren’t raised with African-Americans, and while you live in an African-American neighborhood, you don’t have permission. You might be able to use in class with us. However, when you use it, it would be totally marked because you can’t spell it, use its grammar, and your accent is bad. (I mean you NO disrespect.)

Besides providing me with a huge laugh, the student was absolutely correct of how, when, and why to use language for good and ill effect. Relinquishing my authority and using myself as an

example is effective because my language is usually in stark contrast to that of my students but it is also another way to have students become experts on a subject that I “cannot” know about because I am not a member of the in-group.

Once I am confident that I have been successful with such building blocks of language on the word level I move into semantics and pragmatics to assist in writing about other texts. For instance, in response to the story about the expatriate returning to Africa, I pointed to the complex relationships in language and class status and then we could critique the spread of English and other colonizing languages—what the field of World Englishes terms the Outer Circle. I provide a theoretical framework by introducing how English became a lingua franca and how adopting English can help with acquiring greater knowledge or a more stable material existence, but it can hurt if it cuts users off from a first language or discourse community. I remind students that language use is a choice and while speaking “white” may conflict with ethnic credibility, there are nuances and inherent power relations in inter-racial and intra-racial language. Most students come from nations with a history of colonization and they understand resulting divisions imposed (this is relevant when we discuss the languages and peoples from Hispaniola, as a great majority of my students are from the Dominican Republic or Haiti). Before I integrated the Hornby novel, students had little sympathy for the African taxi driver left behind though afterwards, students critiqued both the driver and the expat. This discussion fit well with the one on register since the character who returned had lost his ability to use local language—and students talked about their own code switching. Students initially proved less able to write about these discussions, though the awareness of linguistic imperialism was useful and I referred to works by Robert Phillipson and Margie Berns. For students, understanding this issue was an important step to writing about it; for me, helping students “own” English was essential to address power in language. It is not a zero-sum situation, so if I appear to give up control in the classroom and students take it, we all win.

As much of the work I assigned feature terms or language considered offensive or only available to members of an in-group, I introduced exercises so students could dissect the semantic and pragmatic ways such language is employed. My especial concern is to provide a means for talking about words as repositories for cultural, social, even national information. Examining words as compilations of sounds to which we assign

meaning helps students more objectively consider the arbitrariness and relativity in language, as my discussion of the etymology of what we call the *n-word* (or the *c-word*) showed. Semantic broadening shows the operation of a sensitive term in another language or dialect. A fruitful instance occurred during a discussion of gendered language and urban youth slang. After a reading in which Katie's former lover confronts her husband, saying, "I thought, why not take the bull by the horns, sort of thing?" her husband David replies, "Horns being the operative word ... Seeing as I'm wearing them. ... The horns. Cuckold. ... Stupid joke" (Hornby 2001: 109-110). My assumption that students would not recognize "cuckold" was incorrect. For the many students from Colombia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Ecuador, or the Dominican Republic, Spanish—their first or home language—allowed them to make an even richer connection than I could have provided. They explained to me that the term for cuckold in Spanish is *cuerno* and that a man who is cuckolded is a *cornudo*. But the term can apply to a woman—*cornuda*—as well, in striking contrast to English. Students pointed out that another term, *bo'*—a version of the word *whore* applies to both sexes.

I am careful to consider that there are diverse Englishes—as well as diverse Spanishes—as when U.S. students are confused by lexical differences while reading. However, the very strangeness of some language allows students to write about what they do not understand. This occurred in a discussion of Hornby's description of a character *chuntering*—a character talks to the telephone while waiting for someone to answer, saying, "Pick the fucking phone up" and "I know you're there" (2001: 77). When I asked students to define *chunter* using textual clues, they said *babble*, *complain*, *bicker*, and *rant*—coming close but not apprehending the full meaning. Students likewise enjoyed that the United States has words that the English may not know—I recounted an English friend's puzzlement when I described students as *rambunctious*. Understanding varieties and different registers in English reveals that there is not one standard English and that different lexical and dialectal entries made students more aware of how they use English themselves; in New York City there is not one English and we often need clarification. The reason I incorporate lexicographical exercises and lexicography is to display how language is productive and changes in meaning depend on circumstance—when words are formalized as in dictionaries, we can judge and rank; formal and informal language are equally

powerful with different kinds of social sanctions and for different purposes.

Another pedagogical challenge emerged from the discussion of cultural differences between the English language of Hornby's novel and that of my diverse American students. Here again, a useful way to help students understand differences is analogy. The characters in *How to Be Good* are self-aware do-gooders insulated from suffering, believing that their occupations, their voting records, and charitable donations absolve them of the sin of inaction. Their middle-class virtue, their goodness, is their religion and Hornby assumes that readers will understand his characters' struggle. Laura Miller observes that Hornby's character David's "transformation ... prompts him to tell Katie, 'I'm a liberal's worst nightmare.'" However, that is not because he suffers from the conservative American Angry Guy's delusions of rhetorical grandeur. It's because he truly *has* become a liberal's—specifically Katie's—worst nightmare ... 'I think everything that you think,' he explains to his wife. 'But I'm going to walk it like I talk it' (Hornby 2001: par. 4). Understanding Hornby's characters' motivations, however, depends on understanding the characters' socioeconomic condition, which can be challenging for my students, one of whom remarked that all produce in his village in Mexico is organic because they grow their own food. Like all satire, Hornby's novel was sometimes difficult for students to understand when they lacked the context; successful satire requires knowledge of an original and moreover, successful satire takes aim at the powerful, not the weak, which is what my students often are. Among students who may be the first in their family to go to secondary school or even university, their social and economic situations incline them towards gaining the very things and attitudes that Katie and David shed. Students cannot always consider long-term benefits of an *education*; rather, many aspire to the immediate benefits of a *degree*. It was imperative for me to go to my students and their knowledge, meeting somewhere in the middle; this has been my education.

Since recognizing that my students are well-served by applying and analyzing linguistic concepts to their writing processes, I have continued to work on implementing such strategies in first-year writing courses. Instead of the previous approach in which I taught writing skills in a linear fashion, directing students toward writing formal essays, I have rebuilt assignments and structured work so that the parts are differently integrated into the composition

process. In each of these cases students act as editors to their writing and they create a relationship between author and audience that is more purposeful than before they began to take on roles as editors and not merely authors. A particularly fruitful example of teaching the force of language occurs when I created a major assignment on register. I asked students to write about the concept and exemplify it and then introduce it to others. First, they summarized an article in three distinct registers for specific audiences, framing each summary with an introduction that explained their process and a conclusion in which they justified their choices of language, vocabulary, syntax, showing the processes and choices. Students reported having never given the concept thought and expressed surprise that there was such a thing. The last part of the assignment was to interview a member of each audience and then report in writing on their findings. Certain students who had not previously been active in class suddenly were energized and took the interviewing seriously, detailing in their papers how they had succeeded or failed in reaching their intended audience and register. My success with this assignment came later, when students relayed after the semester that they had a greater understanding of how good writing is not a process of putting words on paper—or seeing them appear on a screen—but good writing begins with knowing that there are choices to be made with individual words, and then with sentences that require order and development. My creating assignments that build on students' earlier work meant that students could achieve manageable writing goals. What I have found is that when I develop assignments that address language and writing, I can adapt them to subsequent courses; writing assignments and tasks can be seen as choosing from a menu of generic options that we apply to various specific purposes.

As I present different types of writing and rhetoric, I introduce a revision of the theory of Contrastive Rhetoric. For example, in a friendly discussion between Paul Matsuda and Dwight Atkinson, Matsuda suggests that they investigate “rhetorical practices, including textual features ... different traditions, different historical moments, and also how they interact with each other, and how they might change over time as they encounter different rhetorical practices or demographic shifts, or linguistic shifts, etc., and [are] not necessarily tied directly or strictly to the analysis of texts.” This exchange indicates how far discussions of Contrastive Rhetoric have come since Robert Kaplan introduced the concept.

Matsuda suggests that Contrastive Rhetoric could be adapted to different fields, such as “interlanguage pragmatics, it could be second language writing, it could be discourse analysis or discourse studies ... also TESOL, which frequently overlaps with applied linguistics and composition studies, and communication education” (2008: 291). An evolution of Contrastive Rhetoric, then, provides space for moving from rigid and linear models for writing styles and composing into the more general and flexible understanding that language and writing are acculturation within a variety of academic contexts. As I have come to teach writing through linguistic change, thinking of a new kind of Contrastive Rhetoric provides a relativistic view of textual analysis that encourages students to see the variations of language and writing. We can study varieties of language by studying differences; I learn as students do, and I reformulate my teaching styles and assignments based on what I come to understand about them. When we acknowledge registers, Englishes, and linguistic varieties, we allow students access to textual analysis independent of the potentially intimidating perceived standards of academic correctness because they learn to become, as it were, bi-dialectal in their writing.

In my classes in New York City, it is best to assume that teaching composition is necessarily teaching literacies. While first-year students of traditional ages generally populate this course, and these examples have been primarily anecdotal, students who engaged with complex, sophisticated concepts like those I have outlined here—in discussions and in written assignments showed not only increased enthusiasm for the course, but also improvement in their writing from the first papers submitted to those at the end of the semester. It might have been simpler for them to hew more closely to easy writing tasks, but instead many students took up in their writing—from low-stakes exercises in class to structured essays—the more challenging topics of writing about and analyzing how language changes us and how users can change language. In every composition classroom there will be writers with vastly different abilities and I have no such person as a “traditional” student in class any more precisely because of the issues I mention, but it is possible to take advantage of this heterogeneity by employing linguistic theories and leading students to understand language in new ways. I have learned by trial and error (many errors) to develop what students already know. Composition is many things and when I started to teach writing by presenting language as a fantastic machine to

disassemble and put together in new ways, I understood the revaluation of communicative competence in writing and register. These are skills we use in “real life,” and the classroom is merely one part.

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