

The Benefits of Reciprocal Multilingual Tutoring

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Abstract

This paper will reveal the reciprocal benefits of multilingual tutoring by showcasing my experiences working with students from the Nanjing Cohort at Salem State University. Identity is a term that unites but also divides. Asian Americans are divided by language, social class, culture, sexuality, and race. By reflecting on my tutoring sessions, experiences growing up, and the relationships I built with my clients, I will provide my audience a better understanding of how I grew closer to my Asian culture, while helping multilingual writers assert their voices in their writing. By describing the obstacles I faced as a student, I will show my audience how I felt alienated by both cultural groups for not being considered “authentic enough.” By sharing my first-hand experiences through the paper, I will help my audience understand how identity is influenced by the community and how stereotypes affect Asian Americans’ sense of independence and pride. It is crucial to explore the reciprocal benefits of multilingual tutoring not only to help multilingual writers succeed but also to support tutors and foster a welcoming and positive community.

Multilingual Writers and Multilingual Tutoring

Multilingual writers often face the dilemma of balancing two contradictory voices. The first voice is based on their own cultures, beliefs, and identities, while the second voice is the “authentic” American voice—the so-called “beautiful language,” to borrow Michelle Cox’s phrase—which is considered the standard in the eyes of their peers, professors, and colleagues. As an experienced tutor, I have had the opportunity to tutor many talented multilingual writers from various backgrounds. Despite the prevalence of online resources such as Google Translate, The Corpus of Contemporary American English, and Word Phrase Info, multilingual writers still encounter the dilemma of successfully translating their ideas into English while integrating their voice instead of adopting the “authentic” American voice they are so persistent in perfecting in their writing. For this paper's purpose, I interviewed two multilingual writers from Nanjing, China. I will specifically discuss some challenges multilingual writers face during the writing process and note the successful practices I have implemented during my tutoring sessions to help other tutors better support multilingual writers. Lastly, I will note the benefits of reciprocal tutoring and my takeaways from this experience.

During the fall semester of my junior year at Salem State University, I took a Writing Center Practicum course. This course allows students to tutor students at the Writing Center, collaborate with the Writing Center Coordinator, work with experienced tutors, and collaborate with professors to improve students’ experiences and achieve success. It is important to note how tutors work with many disciplines when tutoring writing and various topics as well. During one of my tutoring sessions, I had the opportunity to tutor a multilingual student. I was nervous because I was still in the Practicum and had only been tutoring for a couple of weeks. At the beginning of our session, this individual had difficulty explaining his ideas and started to get

frustrated when he could not articulate his thoughts and concerns clearly. During our session, he pulled out his phone and started to use Google Translate to translate his ideas and questions. After noticing how frustrated he was, I politely asked what language he spoke, to which he responded Mandarin. Once I found out we both spoke Mandarin, I instantly switched gears and continued our session in his native language. Immediately, he was relieved and freely expressed his writing concerns, and we worked together to revise his paper accordingly. During our session, I switched back and forth from English to Mandarin to explain different concepts and note useful examples. At the time, the Writing Center did not have many bilingual tutors, so I was later asked if I would become a specialist tutor for the new students in the Nanjing Cohort.

In 2018, Salem State University welcomed fifteen students from Nanjing, China. All of the students in the cohort were English majors. In the past two years, the cohort has continued to grow. Specifically, the new cohort has over twenty students. Most of the students in the cohort have concentrations in education and communication. Besides the Writing Center, students were not provided with any other reading or writing support outside of their professors' office hours. For the past three semesters, the Writing Center teamed up with Professor Amy Minett, Coordinator of First-Year and Multilingual Writing, to develop workshops to help international students with reading comprehension. While having Amy's expertise is wonderful, we know her workshops are not sustainable, given her responsibilities. We are hopeful the University will provide a multilingual reading specialist to assist international students.

The first time I met with the students from the Nanjing Cohort was during a meeting with the students and the Writing Center Coordinator at the time, Rebecca (Becky) Hallman Martini, who is also a co-founder of *The Peer Review*. During this meeting, the students revealed to me that many of their peers, including themselves, often fear their writing does not sound

authentic according to American standards, so they will frequently Google expressions and vocabulary words to use in their writing. As a result, they will refer to websites such as Thesaurus.com, listen to YouTube videos, and podcasts. Additionally, they worried that their own voices and “accents” would not be accepted in the academic setting because it would be deemed different or wrong. These comments made me think about how I could help ease these students into their new academic setting.

Compared to my colleagues, my tutoring sessions were different. To reach out to students, I used a popular app the Nanjing students were familiar with: WeChat. I used this app to schedule tutoring sessions and provided support to the students by answering their questions and addressing any concerns they may have had, even during my off time. The best feature about this particular app was how students could communicate with me in their native language by typing and speaking Chinese. Instead of meeting the students in the Writing Center, I conducted my tutoring sessions in study rooms, which provided us with extra privacy. This helped the students feel more comfortable and confident speaking about their ideas, and they were able to work without distractions. As time went on, students felt more comfortable working with other tutors and started to make appointments in the Writing Center.

Since students were on campus all week and often had classes together, I also held weekend sessions at the Starbucks on campus, and encouraged students to come with their friends. Based on the feedback from the students, they appreciated the laid back atmosphere and felt more at ease working with their classmates. At the time of these weekend sessions, I reviewed reading materials, explained prompts, and taught students how to research and implement sources into their writing. In consideration of how empty the campus would be on the weekends, due to Salem State’s student population consisting mainly of commuter students,

Starbucks was a quiet place for students to work and provided me the opportunity to work with multiple people at once, who had similar concerns, without distractions. During these tutoring sessions, I would tutor in Mandarin, which was the students' native language, and switch back and forth between Mandarin and English. Our tutoring sessions provided students a safe and comfortable environment to practice their English and provided me the opportunity to practice my Mandarin.

I tutored students in the Nanjing Cohort regularly. Most of them were motivated to seek help from the Writing Center to become more confident in their writing and to receive a better grade. As I started to meet more of the students, I noticed they often sought help with grammar and sentence-level issues because English was not their native language. Besides grammar and sentence-level issues, students also struggled with writing assignments when they did not understand the material they were reading because of the jargon used. For example, one of the students I tutored took a Shakespeare and theater class. Sometimes, we would read the material together to ensure she was comprehending the material and could appropriately respond to the writing prompts. While reading together, I would summarize and note specific words in the text in Mandarin. One reading students struggled with was Dante's *Inferno*. To help students comprehend the reading, I compared the reading to Diyu, which is hell in Chinese mythology, and explained in Mandarin the similarities between the two. In Asian culture, it is believed that once a person leaves the natural world, their spirit continues in the afterlife. Like Dante's *Inferno*, Diyu is a maze consisting of various levels of hell. Additionally, each level deals with a specific sin and punishment, usually some state of torture. I also went through each level of hell and noted the sin and punishments mentioned. As I discussed these ideas with students in their native language, they took notes in Mandarin and listed the examples mentioned in the story.

Additionally, I also provided students with example sentences in both their native language and English to bridge understanding.

One of the students I tutored weekly eventually took the Writing Center Practicum course taught by the current Writing Center Coordinator, Al DeCiccio, to become a tutor herself. During our conversation, we talked about our weekly tutoring sessions, the Practicum, and her experiences as a tutor. At the beginning of our conversation, we talked about our weekly sessions and how they encouraged her to take the Practicum herself. As we were talking, she noted, “Our tutoring sessions helped ease my anxiety and helped me practice my English. These sessions also gave me a better idea of what tutoring sessions could possibly look like.” Just as we were discussing her previous experiences with other tutors, she mentioned how impressed she was with the tutors’ skills and knowledge of writing and hoped she could develop these skills as well. She went on to say, “I really hope to have these skills too so I can get better at writing and improve my social skills, which will help me achieve my career goal as a teacher in the future. I think it is also a good chance to gain experience and work with my peers.” As we discussed her experiences as a tutor at the Writing Center, she expressed how tutoring helped her grow as a writer and become more confident in speaking her mind. “I appreciate the chance to work with others,” she offered, “and I enjoy discussing with others about writing or anything related to academic assignments. I also get to make new friends and build community relationships.” I was overjoyed to hear how much she enjoyed tutoring at the Writing Center, especially since I know how much she had struggled in the beginning.

Reciprocal Benefits of Multilingual Tutoring for my Long-term Substitute Teaching

Tutoring students in the Nanjing Cohort is also helping me become more confident as an educator. I accepted a long-term substitute position as a sixth-grade English teacher. To help

struggling writers, I often implement and modify strategies I have used with the Nanjing Cohort students. For example, I focus on higher-order concerns such as coherence, clarity, or organization. Damaging a student's self-esteem is the only outcome from marking up a paper, especially when it comes to low-order issues. The strategy of focusing on higher-order concerns allows students to see their mistakes and then learn from them by practicing. Not only does this approach boost their self-esteem, but they are leaving class knowing they have become better, more capable writers.

Additionally, I will break assignments down into smaller units to increase interaction between teacher and student and among students. Lastly, I try to make the lessons more visual by providing them with concrete examples or mentor texts. By doing so, I believe I am helping students break down complex ideas and engage them, too. This year, one of my main goals is to teach students how writing matters and show them how we can use writing to advocate, to make a difference, to express ideas, and to learn from different perspectives. Implementing these strategies and using different pedagogies, such as process pedagogy and collaborative pedagogy, has helped me get closer to achieving this goal.

Disadvantages of Being Bilingual and Culturally Hybrid

Although there are many benefits of being bilingual and mixed race, there are also disadvantages as well. Cultural hybridity establishes the effort to maintain balance among different values, beliefs, and practices in two or more cultures. In cultural hybridization, an individual constructs a new sense of identity that reflects the culture. However, hybridity may cause individuals confusion and conflict, especially when they are moving freely between multiple identities (Nieto and Bode). For many years, I found it difficult to find a balance between my American identity and my Asian identity because the two were vastly different from

one another. Due to the inner conflict I experienced, I felt stressed, confused, angry, and eventually resented the fact that I was of mixed race.

Asian Americans are often lumped together as one category and seen as one minority group. Oftentimes, people think all Asians are Chinese, while ignoring the fact there are other ethnic groups such as Thai, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese. Different languages in Asian culture are also being lumped into the same group, and are dismissed as being their own separate dialect. By referring to the Asian community as only one minority group, people ignore the diversity of the different cultures we have around us. Culture is defined as “consisting of the values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity” (Nieto and Bode 137). Not only does it include holidays, food, and attire, but it can also include family dynamics and relationships, values, and attitudes as well. In our society today, we are grouped by cultures, races, and social classes. These groups that we live in can cause us to question who we are, if we belong, and our purpose. Even though “one’s identity may seem to be a very personal and individual decision,[...], there can be many historical, socioeconomic, and sociological factors that can directly or indirectly influence this decision” (Assimilation and Ethnic Identity). However, there are many different forms of ethnic identity among Asian Americans, which is why it is crucial for us to examine external and internal factors that can affect how Asian Americans shape their identity.

One possible outcome of assimilation may result in what is known as the “melting pot.” This is when different ethnic groups come together and, through this interaction, create a new culture by incorporating the various cultures into one. Another possible outcome is known as

cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is “when the different racial/ethnic groups keep their unique cultural norms, traditions, and behaviors, while still sharing common national values, goals, and institutions” (Assimilation and Ethnic Identity). There are many factors that can affect ethnic identity, and it is important for us to continue to research patterns of the process of assimilation, not only to continue to keep cultures alive, but also to foster a welcoming and positive community.

Being of mixed race also adds the struggle of feeling pressure to identify with one race over the other. The first time I experienced personal conflict with my identity was when I was eight years old and had to self-categorize myself for standardized testing. After having to choose one identity over the other, I felt confused as to why I only could pick one race. As a result of my confusion, I categorized myself as being “other,” which emphasized how different I saw myself from my classmates. As a student, I felt alienated by both cultural groups for not being considered “authentic enough” and did not feel a sense of belonging. My first time hearing racial or stereotypical slurs was during middle school. Since the comments were being directed at me, I felt people were not accepting of my Asian background, which caused me to hide that part of my identity for a long time. As a result, I didn’t tell people my middle name because it was in Chinese, refused to bring friends over to the house, and was embarrassed to speak Mandarin when in public. Not only did this cause a rift between my mother and me, but I also felt disconnected from my Asian culture. My family in the States would always remind me of how lucky I was to be Chinese-American, and how I should be proud of being Chinese. However, it was easier for me to ignore my Chinese background rather than blending in with my classmates.

The concept of being the model minority also put a strain in the relationship I had with my mother and my connection to my Chinese background. Growing up with two cultures under

one roof was a blessing and a curse to me. Since American culture was vastly different from Asian culture, especially with the beliefs, values, and religions, I always felt as if I sided more with the more “carefree” American culture. Although my dad emphasized the importance of school, he would always say, “If you tried your hardest, then that is all I can ask for.” On the other hand, my mom would get mad if I did not get A or score high enough on tests. I felt my mom wanted me to be a “perfect,” well-rounded individual, which to me was not possible. I ended up hating my Chinese background because I did not agree with some of the values and beliefs, especially when it came to academics. Overall, I lost the sense of connection to my Chinese background, because I felt that I connected more to my American identity and I did not belong to that minority group.

During the summer of 2015, my mother and I visited her family in Tianjin, China. It had been ten years since I had last seen my family members and I was nervous, yet excited to catch up with everyone. After stepping off the plane, I remember thinking to myself, “I will always be Chinese-American, and I should take this opportunity to explore my identity.” While visiting my family, I feasted on delicious homemade meals, explored neighborhood supermarkets with my aunts, and visited famous landmarks such as Tiananmen Square, The Great Wall of China, and the Olympic bird nest. While visiting my mother’s side of the family, I also learned more about my mom’s early life. My mom had a very difficult childhood, as she lost her dad at a young age, grew up poor, and under Mao Zedong’s reign. My mom has been very quiet about her childhood, but I loved learning more about her past and finally felt as if I understood how these events shaped who she is. This helped me grow closer to my mom, especially since we were spending more time with one another. We made time to shop around the local stores, eat at restaurants, and took photos together, which we rarely did. When I traveled to China, I also attempted to speak

Mandarin the entire time, which not only helped build my confidence, but also helped me feel more connected to my culture. Reconnecting to my Asian culture was important to me because, since my mom's side of the family still lives in China, I want to feel connected to them and continue to stay in touch.

Reciprocal Benefits of Multilingual Tutoring

Tutoring the students from Nanjing helped me grow an appreciation for my Asian culture. After my tutoring sessions with the students, I often expressed how I missed my mother's side of the family in Tianjin and wished I had a stronger bond with them. In many cases, I feel disconnected, especially since I miss out on weddings, Chinese New Year, and other celebrations. Not only did the Nanjing students understand how I felt, but they also went above and beyond to help me feel more connected. For instance, we often talked about their home life and the cultural differences we both experienced. It was so nice to finally talk to people who understood the stress and difficulty of having to balance two cultures that are vastly different. On one occasion, one of the students brought me Chinese candy because I had mentioned how much I liked eating candy during one of my visits to China. On a separate occasion, one of the students also brought me a popular Chinese drink, which I had trouble finding. Little gestures like these meant a great deal to me because they brought back memories of my visits to Tianjin. Most importantly, I learned to speak more effectively in Mandarin, which helped me feel linguistically connected to the Nanjing students.

Conclusion

Writing centers help alleviate stress, provide opportunities for writers to develop and practice new skills, and encourage collaboration. Through the power of conversation, writers learn how to expand on their ideas and become better writers. Still, writing centers should focus

on being committed to creating and fostering a welcoming environment for writers regardless of their writing skills. Since tutors work with writers across different languages and cultures, they need to develop and practice the skills to help them facilitate their tutoring sessions. To help create a relaxed atmosphere and open learning environment, tutors can conduct their sessions in the writer's native language and implement various strategies to help struggling writers stay authentic to their writing. As my narrative illustrates, the reciprocal benefits of multilingual tutoring are endless, and multilingual tutoring opens doors to new opportunities for both writers and tutors.

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