

## Cultivating a Translingual Approach to Academic Writing [Instructor Guide]

By Stephanie Renee Payne

*“My weapon has always been language, and I've always used it, but it has changed. Instead of shaping the words like knives now, I think they're flowers, or bridges.”*

—Sandra Cisneros

As all students are language learners within the context of reading, writing, and critical analysis in higher education, the goal is to invite students to engage in a broader view of language while also preparing them for college-level writing. The Conference on College Composition and Communication's 1974 resolution on “Students' Right to Their Own Language,” and the 1988 resolution articulating a National Language Policy recognized several decades ago that language diversity is a relevant issue. In this globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century, the issue of language diversity is more relevant than ever. As writing instructors, it is our responsibility to teach not only the power of language in writing but also to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways we use language to communicate every day and to create “bridges” through language.

Therefore, recognizing that communication within MLL populations, first generation English speakers, and adaptations of English as viable modes of written communication is crucial. Further, students often demonstrate an aptitude to combine multiple modes of English in their daily communications. There is a long history of meshed communication. The integration of language differences into our pedagogy as language educators is ripe with possibilities.

The following writing process offers a guideline to code-mesh within academic texts that adhere to Standard Written English (SWE), while creatively using a “translingual” approach, a term Suresh Canagarajah, Applied Linguistics and English Professor at Pennsylvania State University defines as a “paradigm shift” recognizing that “languages are always in contact with and mutually influence each other.” Canagarajah stresses that users of this technique do not need “separate competences for separately labeled languages.” This is an approach that rather than mimicking SWE conventions, which in some cases asks students to use language without personal engagement, all students of English are invited to engage authentically, authoritatively, and creatively in academic writing.

*Heuristics Using a Translingual Approach:*

### **I. Acquisition of Language Exercise**



The following exercise is an early and continuous classroom conversation that I developed to investigate how students acquire language. This exercise is an invitation to explore learned modes of language. For example, an African-American will acquire language differently than her Korean-American counterpart. Further, the MLL with command of three or more languages evaluates language differently than the bilingual learner. To that end, we explore language expansively, with an offering to students to look both within and outside of SWE.

**For homework**, students are asked to choose an essay from [The Power of Prose](#), part of the [PBS Series Do You Speak American?](#) Students are tasked with answering the following questions:

*Why did you choose the essay?*

*Did the essay expand your ideas about language, and if so, in what way?*

In the following in-class discussion, we explore non-traditional texts, such as the poetry of Langston Hughes' [Mother to Son](#), and Sandra Cisneros' [Caramelo](#). We examine the lyrics of Park Hyo Shin's 박효신 - [Beautiful Tomorrow](#) from the album *I am a dreamer*, that features Korean-English code-meshed lyrics. We explore the social impact of code-meshed language from both the reader's and writer's perspectives.

**The in-class exercise** asks students to write in the voice, vernacular, or style of a mother, father, grandmother, or other relative addressed to the student, in the same spirit as Hughes' *Mother to Son*. Students are to examine their association with code-meshed text, along with the exploration of stylistic choices made to capture the authentic voice of their relative.

**For continued exploration**, students are encouraged to bring in non-traditional English texts from a variety of genres, including rap lyrics, poetry, memes, and even family recipes that are representational of what is meaningful to them culturally, linguistically, and stylistically. Students are asked to evaluate their chosen text in light of how it speaks to their individual **literacy narratives**. This process continues as a weekly journal project wherein students explore their **literacy autobiography**. Within this autobiography, students are asked to examine texts and encouraged to evaluate how writers address and connect to them within a text. An ongoing query asks students to consider:

1. *How does the text represent the way you learn/relate to/use language?*
2. *How does the text empower/inspire you as a speaker/writer/thinker?*
3. *How might the text exclude/negate/marginalize?*

Within the journal project, the narration of students' writing development offers an opportunity for students to become aware and invested in their language choices, and to consider their literacy backgrounds when both composing and evaluating texts. Lastly, students are asked to write a reflective essay about their language awareness, development of style and voice, audience awareness, and empowerment as writers to track their progress over the course of the semester.

## II. Evaluation of Process of Code-Meshed Writing

This technique offers students the tools to evaluate the use of other languages and non-traditional uses of English—the translingual approach—within their academic writing. We look at content, style, audience, and the overall communicative value when implementing diverse uses of language into a text. This exploration liberates students from the notion that there is only one “right” way to use written language, but also challenges students, as this type of language integration can be risky. Students must establish that a translingual approach is rhetorically justified, critically relevant, and communicates ideas with clarity. Students who chose to code-mesh engage in a four-point[1] heuristic, as follows:

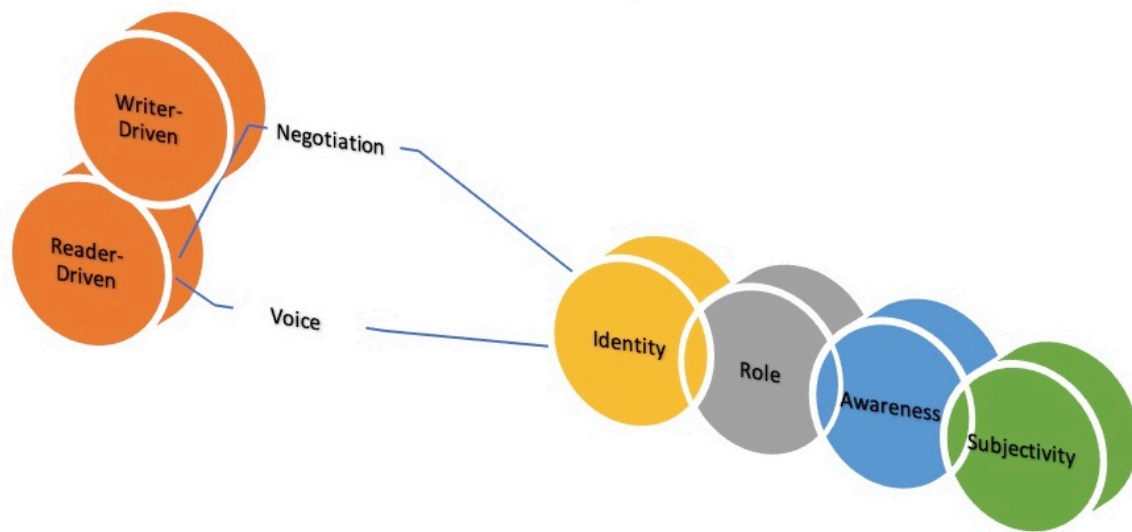


Figure 1.

In the above figure, the interplay between the writer and the reader is a critical consideration. The question for the writer is: *How do I consider my audience while authentically expressing my authoritative voice?* The four pillars—identity, role, awareness, and subjectivity—offer the writer criteria to evaluate code-meshed texts in its ability to provide the reader an enhanced understanding of ideas, while allowing the writer an authentic and authoritative voice as follows:

1. **Identity**—Considers one’s history and national affiliations, how language within one’s heritage can expand the understanding of ideas. Identity provides the student a space to positively draw from their heritage cultivating authentic authorship and the authority of voice. **The question for the student-writer to consider:** *How does identity better inform your reader?*
2. **Role**—Considers the social position of the writer in the renegotiation of power dynamics within systems, such as educational institutions, the workplace, and governmental institutions. Students are encouraged to examine the expectation of one’s role and the dangers of this singular view, and to adapt language accordingly. However, within the renegotiation of the power differentials, students are encouraged to take care with the

renegotiation of roles to holistically acknowledge the need for certain hierarchal structures. In this way, an expansive and inclusive model of renegotiation of language roles within norms is encouraged rather than a tearing down of existing linguistic conventions. **The question for the student-writer to consider:** *What needs to be established to effectively renegotiate your role as a writer within the text, and how best can you meet this goal?*

3. **Awareness**—Considers the negotiation of sometimes conflicting approaches to language. Writers have to negotiate myriad approaches to gain a measure of coherence. The chosen voice can provide a new construction that, while clear and comprehensive, may confront biases and impositions for the reader. A measure of awareness allows the writer to navigate through language using multiple components within voice to modulate and mediate through shifts within approaches to language. Here, a modulation between the reader-driven model and writer-driven model can be attuned with a flexibility in tone to both serve the writer’s need for authenticity with an awareness of an audience’s normative styles and language conventions. **The question for the student-writer to consider:** *How do you use language to guide your reader through potentially uncomfortable paths of language?*
4. **Subjectivity**—Considers an ideological construct that melds interdisciplinary discourses, wherein students find an authentic expression through the evaluation of identity, genre conventions, communicative norms, and the value of these systems for the reader. A subjective approach acknowledges established norms, even to the point of mastery, in order to shape the writer’s voice effectively for a diverse body of readers. **The question for the student-writer to consider:** *How can you use language authoritatively and with clarity to assert your position and push the boundaries of established norms while acknowledging that you recognize and understand those norms?*

This model relies heavily on instructor and peer feedback to foster critical analysis of choices in a code-meshed text. Strategic moves to negotiate rather than adapt, as Figure 1 shows, offers the above four pillars, and provides a bridge through:

1. **Re-Contextualization Strategies** ask students to assess the communicative context to determine if she can code-mesh in this writing project.
2. **Voice Strategies** evaluate the veracity of coded language and make strategic choices as to where coded text can be most effective in expanding meaning for the reader, and to foster authenticity for the writer. Most writers strategize a code-meshed text to express a value for her identity, an ownership of English, and an authority in writing.
3. **Interactional Strategies** rely on inviting, guiding, and to “actively negotiate,” as Canagarajah states, with readers to assist in re-imagining personal engagement with a text. Strategies such as parenthetical aids, italicized text, footnoting, and selected transliteration and/or translations of some text while offering no transliteration and/or translations of other code-meshed text to establish a co-construction of meaning, which encourages a more rigorous reader engagement with a text. Students must evaluate the value of how a text is received through the decisions made to assist the readers with

aides and when to invite the reader to engage with more depth within the absence of such aids.

4. **Textual Strategies** consider the aesthetic effectiveness and persuasive appeal of the text. How a student shapes her text considers interaction with readers, rhetorical justification, and a balance of a negotiated invitation to readers to explore identity and the ethos of the author as a part of the text and complementary to the content.

While the implementation of voice in academic writing has been challenged by some researchers[2], within a 21<sup>st</sup> century context code-meshed language has broadened the scope of voice in academic writing and offered readers a more interactive rhetorical process.[3]

Ultimately, taking on the challenge of using a translingual approach in academic writing has proven to offer many rewards, referring back to the necessity of building bridges in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Language scholars have found that as students push the boundaries of established norms, not only are they more engaged and enthusiastic about writing, their critical awareness of SWE is heightened, as well. Further, the normative assumptions that guide language studies in international business rely on language as a social practice. With an understanding of globalization as the welcomed entanglement between the universal and the particular, businesses have an understanding of these two notions as separate entities.

As language instructors, it is incumbent upon us to prepare students to compete and communicate within a globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century, but to also offer students the most valuable commodity in written texts that transcends era, and that is a voice. Geneva Smitherman, in her groundbreaking book, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, wrote: "I'm told that in the time of the ancient Greeks, when the orator Demosthenes spoke, the people simply applauded. But when Paracles spoke, they marched. So what we want people to do with language is to move people, and in fact to make them march." To equip our students with the tools to compose prose that solicits movement among their readers, we must afford our students a full complement of expression, which includes permission to develop their unique voice and the guidance to use all aspects of language in written texts.

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[1] Adapted from and inspired by *Codemeshing in Academic Writing: Identifying Teachable Strategies of Translanguaging* by [SURESH CANAGARAJAH](#)

[2] *Critiquing voice as a viable pedagogical tool in L2 writing: returning the spotlight to ideas* Journal of Second Language Writing, 11 (3)(2002), pp. 177-190

[3] Matsuda, P. K., & Tardy, C. M. (2007). Voice in academic writing: The rhetorical construction of author identity in blind manuscript review. *English for Specific Purposes*, p.247.