

Revising Words, Revising Worlds

BY GRETA VOLLMER

Over the course of the 1997-98 school year, I found myself a part of a vibrant writing community in Ms. Andersen's¹ third period ESL Writing class. As I observed and tutored, students from places as diverse as Tibet, Ethiopia and Germany wrote poems, agonized over topics, and embarked on long fables of ancient heroes or dramatic stories of contemporary teenagers. Working in pairs, they wrote "Partner Letters" to each other, providing feedback on each other's work. Ms. Anderson prodded them to respond specifically to one another's writing, asking responders questions like, "What good writing techniques do you see?" "Where could the author add more words?" "What is the theme in this poem?"

I have found myself frequently considering the use of peer response, a widely accepted feature of the writing process we encourage. Why do we do it? The reasons Ms. Andersen put forth will ring true for many. She said, "I want my students to have a sense of audience other than the teacher; I want to convince them of the importance of the reader, of negotiating an understanding with that person on the other side of the page. I want them to learn 'the language of response,' to be able to articulate their ideas about writing. And I want them to hone their writing skills by looking at other's papers, then learn to turn that same discerning eye on their own work."

Yet in spite of the clear rationale for facilitating peer response, ESL teachers often remain ambivalent about its use. For one thing, ESL students are often unconvinced of the rationale underlying the practice, stubbornly insisting that the

teacher, and the teacher alone, "correct" their work. Kim, in an emotional outburst in one class, expressed this sentiment: "We feel it's uncomfortable when we do it. You're the teacher — you teach me! But this is all friends, and we can not do it!" At other times, teachers worry that English language learners lack the proficiency to provide adequate feedback, or that the wide range of language levels in a single class make it problematic for students to understand each other's work and respond in a helpful way.

These concerns are real. Yet, throughout the year, I also came to wonder whether our concerns about language may leave untouched a richer source of interaction, a way of making sense of the many cultural worlds that inhabit our ESL classrooms. Good writing is more than simply putting thoughts on paper and organizing them well. Writing at its best expresses the core of a writer's identity, with culture an integral component. But does "culture" have a place in the writing classroom? Perhaps not if we define writing as purely a skill, a necessary skill our students need to survive academically. But if instead we define language (in all its forms) as social practice, then "culture become the very core of language teaching" (Kramersch, p.8). Claire Kramersch, in *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, argues that "[c]ulture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background . . . ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least . . . challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them" (Kramersch, p. 2). Our cultural world

view is clearly an integral part of all we write and think. By focusing on surface levels of response, and asking our English language learners to do the same, I wondered, have we shortchanged them and pushed to the background the cultural identities that inform their writing?

The God Peach

Back in Ms. Andersen's class, the sun beats into the warm room as Tran leans intently over her work. Next to her, her partner Tsega is more distracted, tapping her long, brightly colored nails impatiently on the desk. Both are writing "Creations" on self-chosen topics of any genre or length. Tsega is considering her story, "The Poisoned Lipstick," while Tran reads over her first draft of the "God Peach":

It takes 1000 years for the peach to blossom and it takes 10,000 years to be able to eat. What so good about the peach that all the people want to eat it? Even the monkey king and those angel want to taste its sweet tenderness.

Once upon a time up in the heaven the Peach garden was blossoming, big and juicy. One peach was three times bigger than the living peach and juicy as everything you wish. One of the princes want to eat it, but the King, her father does not want her to eat the peach because if she eat it she will become pregnant. She does not listen to her father that she sneak in the peach garden and stole one. After she ate it her stomach become so big and huge that she have the baby. On that day all the women in the living earth can become pregnant any time.

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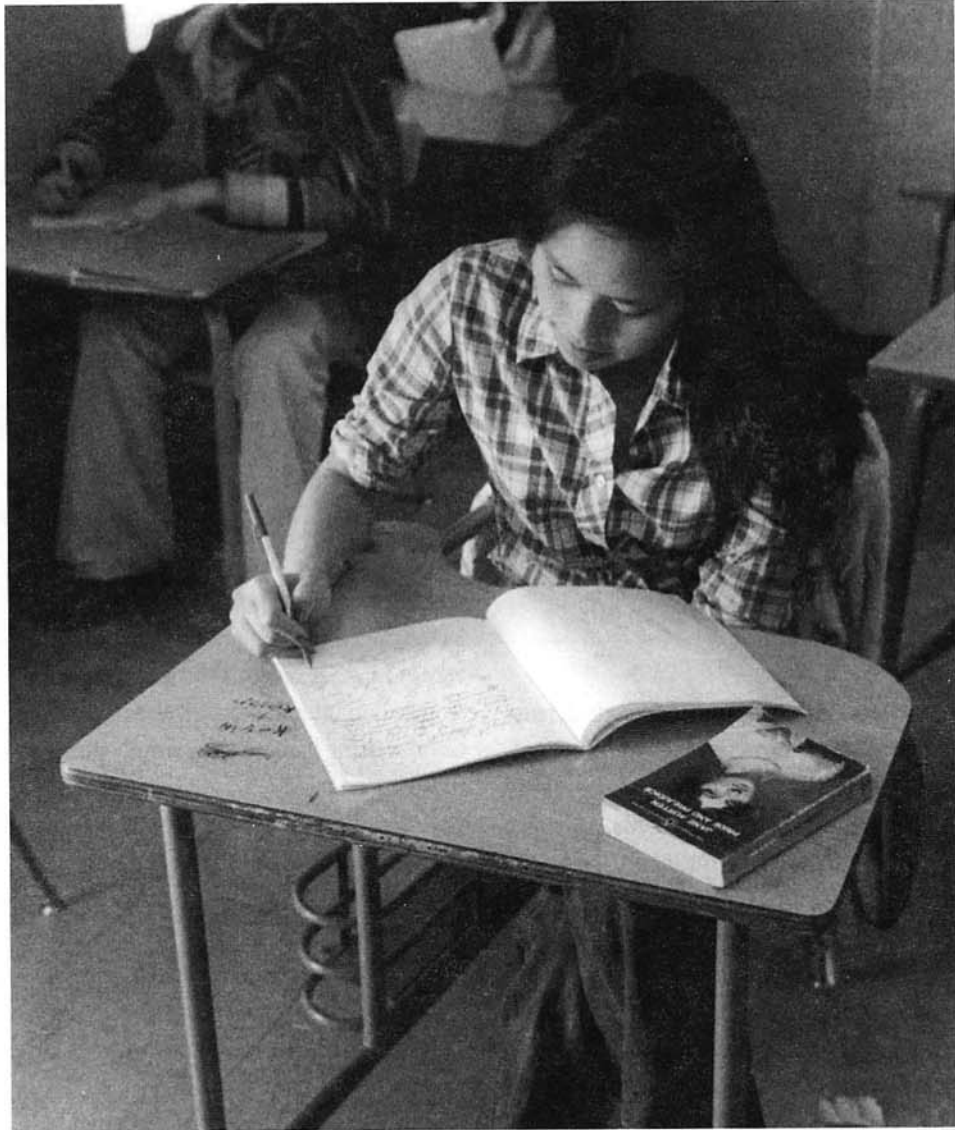
Again, the prince want to eat the peach and when he sneak in the garden, he stole one and ate it. While he chew the peach, one of the guards walk in and in his hurry he swallow fast and got choke in the middle of his throat. That peach stuck in his throat and become the legend that is why all men have the Adam's apple.

Her first draft complete, Tran gives it to Tsega for comments. In a Partner Letter, Tsega responds carefully and at length, offering her “suggested changes” for Tran’s story. She writes:

Their names were Adam and Eve. Their God told Adam not to eat the fruit (maybe peach but I don't remember what kind of fruit. ... The snake tells Adam and Eve to eat the fruit. God was sad, and then Adam regret why he broke his promise - that's why all men have Adam's apple.

The next day, Tran and Tsega engage in an animated discussion of the tale. Tsega likes the tale; she says: “I think it’s true. I think it’s history. It is a Bible story.” She then adds earnestly, “If you were Christian, I think you can describe the story well, but it’s still good. If you were a Christian, you could write this really good.” With a spirited grin, Tran looks at Tsega: “I don’t want no God in there!”

Ms. Andersen, overhearing the conversation from across the room, comes over to confer with the girls: “What we have here is a cultural clash. One cultural tradition is being stuck on another, and you, Tran, don’t want it stuck on. That’s OK. Tsega, you must not feel offended that Tran is going to end



up rejecting all of your suggestions because she wants to keep the story Buddhist. She doesn’t want God in there. She doesn’t want the Christian story.”

As Ms. Andersen moves away, Tsega adds apologetically, “I had to say something.” Tran nods and turns back to her paper, “It’s OK!”

Over the next few days, Tran moves on to her second draft, focusing on adding

descriptive adjectives, and cleaning up the grammar. She explains the role of the prince and princess more carefully, adding that “because they are the children of the gods, whatever happens then it will happen to everyone on earth.” Her one major changes lies in the revised ending:

From this we know that we should listen to our parents. The more you

wait, the more the peach will taste better. I really want to try to god's special peach, but I know that there is no way I could taste it, because it was just a fairy tale.

Tsega's comments are handed in along with her final draft, but no more is said of them.

A Cultural Faultline

What happened here? A failed dialogue, an opportunity lost; two cultural perspectives approached each other but were left unexplored. As a writer, Tran was not pushed to examine the meanings embedded in her legend, nor to take into account the meanings that Tsega attributed to it. Tsega, for her part, simply came to the sad conclusion that Tran was not capable of telling this story, since it so clearly belonged to "her" cultural background and not Tran's. I couldn't help but be struck by the richness that went untapped in this peer response conference.

What might have happened instead? Perhaps as teachers we need not to abandon such "cultural faultlines" (Kramsch 1993) when they occur, but explore them — and offer our students tools for doing the same. Kramsch terms this task one of "entering a sphere of interculturality", a sort of third place that allows learners "to take both an insider's and outsider's view" of both cultural perspectives (p. 210). She explains further: "If meaning emerges through social interaction, it is pointless to try and teach fixed, normative phenomenon of language use...teachers should be encouraged to recognize the rupture points in the logic of explanations brought forth by their

students in order to bring cross-cultural aspects of communication to the fore" (Kramsch, p. 205-6).

Seizing upon this interaction as a rich cultural faultline, the class as a whole could have examined the motifs the two versions have in common — the explanations of the origins of body parts, the consequences of eating forbidden fruits. Many other cultures have folktales attributing conception to the eating of fruit - mangoes in India, peppercorns in Rumania, berries in Finland (Thompson, p. 849). Why is this? What purposes do such stories serve? How are they constructed as a genre? From this discussion, Tran might also have been nudged to examine more closely the contradiction between her emphatic assertion about not wanting God in her story, and the title of her story, the God Peach. What kind of God is she thinking of? As writers, both Tran and Tsega, by seeing through the eyes of the other, could have reached a negotiated understanding not only of each other's version of the tale, but of the deeper cultural value such stories hold.

In my mind, I returned to our rationales for peer response: a sense of audience, a sense of ownership, a negotiated understanding with a reader. If we truly want these negotiated understandings to enrich student writing, do our ELL student have the tools to explore the cultural faultline that will inevitably emerge? Instead of being ambivalent about peer response in ESL classrooms, I would argue that we need to explore the possibilities for true cross-cultural understanding and see it as a potentially rich, not problematic, part of

our writing classes. If the channels of communication had been fostered and kept open, the differences explored, Tran might have come to a deeper sense of ownership, a sense of what really made this legend, and others like it, part of her Vietnamese culture. Instead of two "conflicting" versions of a similar story, an understanding of the commonalities would have offered both writers the chance to explore the role of legend and myth in a culture. This type of peer response, of "peer negotiation," could lead to deeper knowledge, not just of word choice, or sentence structure or organization, but of the world views that inform our writing. Perhaps then Tran would have been less apt to dismiss her creation as "just a fairy tale" in the end.

References

- Kramsch, Claire. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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