Khasru’s English Lesson:
Ethnocentricity and Response to Student Writing

I got the feeling that the teacher was questioning my normal reality... The semantic content of my work was not within her particular frame of reference.
—Morgan Dalphinis, St. Lucian-born linguist, describing a teacher’s reaction to one of his compositions soon after his childhood arrival in Britain: from a speech presented to the annual conference of the National Antiracist Movement in Education (NAME), April 1988.

K hasru is a Bangladeshi boy, born in the Sylhet, now in his fourth year in a London secondary school. He has been in England for less than eighteen months. He is hardworking, polite, sensible, and desperately keen to get on: one might say (as indeed his teachers do) a model pupil.

His English teacher has set the class an essay for their exam folders. First, the teacher has read a love story from an anthology—a story about a teenage boy’s secret and unrequited love for a girl in his form (grade). Now, she invites the pupils to write love stories of their own.

After one hour-long lesson and a homework assignment, Khasru comes up with the following story:

continued on next page
Khasru’s English Lesson: Ethnocentricity and Response to Student Writing

continued from previous page

Love Story
19-3-87
by Khasru

once upon a time I found a grill and I ask her exquisitement. when you going she said?
I went to go some way when you ask me for: I said No! I said Just Ask you going I am sorry about that have you dont mind she said thats OK and another I find her on the bus and I was set on the Front and she was set on the back about 5 Five Minutes ago two bay was come And then set back of the set then this two bay said to hair hellow! when you going? An she was sket skate.
and boys go am a treying wha trey to do some bad think, An I go everyth the oth and ask hiar they go gona table: tabale with you she said yes.
Can you half me plase. then I take her hire and we goin
We gathing down From the bus we go then I said can you go home.
Now She said I cant go home because I am to seat I said O.K. I take you when a hafe a nover a gos she said I went to say somthing I said what is at.
how do I talk you i cant tall you I said go on tall me what is at.

then she said I love you then I said I love you too anther day
and she go to park and the park she and we taking about
the ther 3 about ther Fumaa said say to hir do have any
brother she said yes I have one brother I said how old has him
she said he was 15 or 16 year old I am not sure when I said
have you got a sister she said No I havent got a sister
then she ask me do you haven any brother or sister
I said yes I have I have one brother and 13 sister then she
said a haw alis them I said my brother was 25 years old and
my sister was one sister was 20 years old and one sister
was 21 year old and one was 18 years old then she said
Is ther married then I said yes two was married and one was
Nat married the she said what about your brother I said my
brother was married his got a 2 daughter and we one son
Now his two daughter

douther his son is dide she said O Now’s then
I said you haven any have yau gata father she said yes that all
i have
if we come home no Now we go every day
out that all the End of Part
one

There is a support teacher in Khasru’s class, who sits with
Khasru to work with him on this preliminary draft. This
support teacher’s corrections are of two kinds. First, there is
a concentration on the production of acceptable Standard
English sentences, spellings, punctuation, and paragraphing;
on presenting the story so that it makes immediate sense to
any reader; and on helping Khasru with obvious confusions—between, for example, “get” and “see,” in the presenta-
tion of direct speech, and as to why “hafre nover” should
really be “half an hour.” These corrections of surface features
are made in red ink and with little explanation, except in the
cases of the confusions, as to what was wrong in the original.

The second set of corrections, made simultaneously with the
first, relate to Khasru’s storytelling style. Again, there is little
explanation as to why they are necessary, comments along
the lines “Let’s get rid of some of these ‘ands,’” and “I think
that sounds a bit more grown-up”’; the support teacher seems
to not to differentiate between these corrections and the surface-
feature corrections. In answer to the Observer’s question
“Are you not actually changing the student’s style here?” for
example, the support teacher replies: “No I don’t think so. It’s
the same basic story. I’ve just made it hang together a bit
better . . . It’s important to these kids that when other pupils
read their work it looks right and gets taken seriously.” In
these corrections, as in the surface-feature ones, the support
teacher’s strategy is to avoid detailed explanation—“at this
stage of language development, it’d frankly be a waste of
both our time”—in favor of teaching through example and
imitation.

After two further lessons, having made impressive sense of
the teacher’s markings, Khasru presents the following sec-
ond draft. His handwriting still bears the influence of the
Bengali script, but his spelling, punctuation, and grammar are
now, as the teacher says, perfect.

Love Story
25-3-87
by Khasru

Once upon a time I saw a girl and I asked her, ‘Where are you
going?’

She said ‘I’m just going somewhere. What are you asking
for? Do you want to know for any special reason?’

I said ‘No. I was just asking where you were going. I’m sorry.
I hope you don’t mind.’

She said ‘That’s okay.’

Afterwards, I saw her on the bus. I was sitting at the front and
she was at the back. After about five minutes, two boys got on.
They sat at the back near the girl and one of them said to her
‘Hello. Where are you going?’

She was scared, and the boys tried to do something bad to her.
I went over and asked her, ‘Are these boys troubling you?’

She said, ‘Yes. Can you help me, please?’

I took her and we got off the bus.

Then I said, ‘Can you get home all right?’

She said, ‘No, I can’t go home. I’m too scared.’

I said, ‘O.K. I’ll take you.’

After half an hour, she said, ‘I want to say something.’

I said, ‘What is it?’

‘How do I tell you? I can’t tell you.’

I said, ‘Go on. Tell me what it is.’

Then she said, ‘I love you.’

Then I said, ‘I love you too.’

Another day she and I went to the park. I said to her, ‘Do you have any brothers?’

She said, ‘Yes. I have one brother.’

I said, ‘How old is he?’

She said, ‘He’s fifteen or sixteen. I’m not sure.’

Then I said, ‘Have you got a sister?’

She said, ‘No, I haven’t.’

Then she asked me, ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

I said, ‘Yes, I have one. I have one brother and three sisters.’

She said, ‘How old are they?’

I said, ‘My brother is twenty-five years old and one of my sisters is twenty. Another sister is twenty-one years old, and the other one is eighteen.’

Then she said, ‘Are they married?’

Then I said, ‘Yes, two are married and one is not married.’

Then she said, ‘What about your brother?’

I said, ‘My brother is married. He had two daughters and one

continued on page 25

Editor’s Note

It is often noted that good teaching is good teaching, that what we do best to help students because their first language isn’t English, or because they have just come to this country, or because English isn’t spoken in their homes, is simply the careful and reflective teaching that we would give to all our students. Everyone benefits from teachers who attend to individual needs, who honor and draw on, rather than penalize, individuals’ cultural or linguistic backgrounds, their personal experiences, their own ways of knowing. It is the case, however, that some students, usually from the cultural “mainstream,” will survive and succeed academically under almost any teaching structure, surviving not because of but in spite of their school experiences. And other students, often cultural and linguistic minorities, will not. As educators, our concerns and our energies must be especially channeled to those who may not succeed unless we are darned good at what we do. In its focus on writing and literacy among linguistic and cultural minority students in an English-speaking educational system, this issue of The Quarterly is devoted to these concerns.

We begin with an article by Alex Moore of the United Kingdom, who writes about a Bangladeshi boy’s experiences as he negotiates not only the standards of written English but the values for English composition with a teacher who is trying, but failing, to help him succeed in the British schools. Beth Winningham writes about her teacher research project examining writing instruction across the curriculum for five ESL students; she shares her discovery of the successes as well as the failed attempts at instruction and learning in the content areas when English is not a student’s first language. Jean Gandesbery discusses her experiences with linguistic and cultural minority students on the college level as they engage in writing oral history assignments. An annotated bibliography on multicultural and multilingual issues around writing and literacy includes contributions by researchers and teachers whose work encompasses these issues—Shirley Brice Heath, Ann Lippincott, Faye Peitzman, and Sandra R. Schecter.

In this Quarterly, too, we hear from National Writing Project sites around the country. Lee Ann Leeson reviews a book on non-sexist language in writing; John Reiff reviews a book on adult literacy programs.

Happy new year—and happy reading.

—M.S.
Khasru’s English Lesson: Ethnocentricity and Response to Student Writing

continued from page 3

son. Now he’s only got two daughters because his son died.

She said, ‘Oh.’

I said, ‘Have you got a father?’

She said, ‘Yes, I have.’

We went home. Now we go out every day.

End of part one.

The omens at this stage are good. Khasru is clearly pleased about his work so far, and his showing it to other Bangladeshi boys in the class seems to have had the effect of encouraging them to take their own stories more seriously. Khasru is fortunate, too, to have one teacher who can work with him on a one-to-one basis, apparently for as long as is necessary to complete each stage of the project: not just any teacher, either, but one committed to a multicultural approach to teaching that, to use his words, “condemns the Eurocentrism that has afflicted compulsory education in this country since its inception.”

The support teacher’s personal view on the teaching of bilingual pupils in mainstream classes in mainstream schools is forceful and exemplary:

Of course they need to be in the mainstream classes: they need to read, listen to, and join in with the languages and behaviors of their English peers—and they need that sort of audience and feedback for their work. They need to know, and deserve to know, that we’re taking them seriously: seriously enough to listen to what they’ve got to say, and to give them the sort of space and opportunities we give to every other kid in the school. There’s no reason why these kids should not do every bit as well—and I’m talking unashamedly about public exams, here too—as if their first language was English. That, anyway, ought to be everybody’s expectation.

Additionally, he subscribes most enthusiastically to the school’s policy statement on the arts, whose tenets apply, among other areas, to creative writing in English and which contains several bold assertions of its view of good practice, of which the following are the most striking:

It is our responsibility as educators to provide an arts education that gives positive recognition to the differences of culture and heritage, and that respects and affirms the identity of each individual child. Such recognition and respect will . . . require a great deal of re-evaluation, study, and in-service training on the part of the staff, whose own education has been largely Eurocentric . . .

The study of the arts in a multicultural curriculum . . . necessitates a conscious break with our ethnocentric tendency to interpret and value art forms from the base line of our own cultural forms. It implies a need to be open-minded and willing to confront our own in-built, often unconscious attitudes and prejudices, and to acknowledge that arts are not given constraints, but that they can change and adapt to circumstances.

Together, enthusiastic pupil and aware teacher again sit down in the English classroom at the committed school to see what can be made of Khasru’s first tentative efforts to reproduce in English a favored literary form, the short story.

As with the first draft of Khasru’s writing, the support teacher’s criticisms are of two related yet distinct varieties. First, there is a continuation of stylistic improvements:

T: Let’s get rid of some of these I said/she said/he said. It sounds better, and we don’t really need all of them anyway. The person reading it can usually work out who’s talking . . . And maybe we can start to make some more interesting sentences. Like we could say here: “I helped her off the bus and asked her if she could get home all right.” . . . Also, I wonder if . . . maybe you could add a bit in here, between “I love you too” and “Another day” . . . You know, like how you felt when you went away, and how you came to go to the park together. Maybe you were nervous asking her out . . . It just makes the story sound a bit better . . . more interesting for the reader. You understand?

Second, there is a new line of questioning that is more to do with the content of the story. This quickly becomes the teacher’s major area of concern, and dominates discussion of the second draft:

T: (reading) After half an hour she said, “I want to say something.” I said, “What is it?” “How do I tell you? I can’t tell you.” I said, “Go on, tell me what it is.” Then she said, “I love you.” Then I said, “I love you too.” Yes, I’m a little worried about this bit. Would she say “I love you,” just like that? It seems a bit sudden. Would they really say that? Maybe they should say it another time, when they’ve got to know each other better? What do you think about that?

K: (Shrugs)

T: All this stuff about relations . . . This isn’t really neces-
Khasru’s English Lesson: Ethnocentricity and Response to Student Writing

continued from previous page

sary, is it . . . For the reader . . . What do you think?

K: (Silence)

T: I mean, I think you could really cut a lot of this out, couldn’t you. Cut most of this out. (Puts lines in the margin against this section.) Just put here (writing in the margin): We talked about our families. She said she had a brother. I told her that my brother was married and . . . You see, that’s the other thing . . . I don’t know . . . I mean, do people talk that way? In real life? Do they talk about how old their brothers and sisters are?

K: Yes, Sir.

T: Do you think so? I’m not so . . . And this here: you suddenly say, “Now he’s only got two daughters because his son died.” And she (teacher smiles) . . . she just says “Oh.”

K: (Smiles)

T: I mean, don’t you think . . . Do you think they’d just talk about it like that, as if it didn’t matter?

K: (Silence)

T: Would they say that?

K: Yes . . .

T: Well . . . You see, I’m not so sure. Maybe. Let’s just put: I told her that my brother was married and (writing) he had two daughters but his baby son had died. Then really you need something else here . . . because now there’s not very much in this bit . . .

It is worth pausing here to consider exactly what the support teacher is doing. Interestingly, he completely passes over, both now and subsequently, Khasru’s “Once upon a time”—a formulaic opening he has picked up from the simple readers he has been given to read since his arrival—presumably because the formula belongs to an English storytelling tradition and the teacher is happy for Khasru to have used it, however inappropriate it might be to this particular genre. Instead (leaving aside the effort—“you need something else here”—to relieve the piece of its nucleus-heaviness), he homes in on three apparently similar stylistic points, which he perceives as weaknesses: (1) the girl’s and boy’s profession of love; (2) the boy’s announcement of his nephew’s death; and (3) the long, detailed conversation about relatives. Of each of these, the teacher asks: Would they say this? Is this how people talk? Essentially, he is concerned with realism (or rather, as we shall see, with his realism: for realism in literature is a notion rather than a fact). Every student knows from English lessons that stories, unless belonging to certain genres such as science fiction or fantasy, must be “true to life.” The question “Whose life?” usually remains unasked. To Khasru’s teacher, his story has failed in this important respect on three counts, which he enumerates to Khasru.

Khasru’s reactions to the teacher’s criticism—unnoticed or disregarded—are not, however, the same in each case: a shrug the first time he is asked about the realism of an episode; a clear yes (i.e., “it is true to life”) when asked about the realism of the other two. I would like to suggest that this difference in response, however small and insignificant it might appear in a transcript, is in fact very important and tells us something important about Khasru’s own reality, the reality that is borne of experience, that he carries in his own head. When he says, Yes, it is true to life for the girl and boy to enter such lengthy conversation about their relatives, or for the boy to announce, so bluntly to Western ears, that his young nephew is dead, he may mean one of two things: (1) Yes, it is the kind of conversation Bangladeshi youngsters might engage in in real life; or (2) Yes, it is the kind of conversation that is standard in that other reality of Bangladeshi storytelling. When the support teacher questions these two episodes, he is, likewise, not merely saying, “Western children do not actually talk to each other like this and therefore no children living in the West talk to each other like this”; but “One of the essentials of good storytelling is to make your story as close to reality (that is, to one particular reality) as possible, just as another is to make your story elliptical or subordinate rather than linear or additive.”

Here, the support teacher’s basic assumption is that there is a way or set of ways of talking to one another and a way or set of ways of telling a story—in both cases, traditional English ways. You do not formally discuss relatives with a potential lover on your first meeting, either in real-life situations or in fictional ones; and if someone in the family dies, you do not talk about it as if it is just another aspect of living. These are the ways, the conventions, the discourses the teacher has been brought up with, and there is no question but that they are the right ways, the right conventions, the right discourses. This leaves no room for the possibility of linguistic diversity in the broadest sense, that embraces genre, perception, and form, and that is suggested by the whole-school policy—which on one level the teacher supports.

Khasru, meanwhile, feels some confusion. On the one hand, he has been asked to make his story true-to-life. On the other,
when he does just that—or thinks he has done just that—he has his work criticized for its not being true-to-life. But there is more to consider. For whether Khasru has been writing according to the rules of a genre—perhaps an essentially oral genre—of storytelling learned in his native Bangladesh, or whether he was making an attempt at representing a new kind of realism, we have no way (until Khasru is able to tell us for himself) of knowing. What we might surmise is that Khasru has never, in the country of his birth, been asked to write down a love story by a teacher. This is likely to be a new experience for him. How does he go about it?

Clearly, one way he goes about it is to examine the models already presented to him and to attempt to replicate these. “Once upon a time” might represent something of a false start—more appropriately, perhaps, seen as part of his current literary “interlanguage”—but it is an indication of this student’s taking into his writing repertoire new formulaic patterns that for the time being must sit side by side with existing ones. As to whether, in a Western European love story, a girl does come out and say “I love you” to a boy she has only just said hello to, that is something Khasru has not yet worked out. Certainly, it is a possibility. After all, what does “I love you” mean? When Khasru shrugs at the support teacher’s question, “Would she say ‘I love you’ just like that?” it may be because he simply does not know. That is to say, if he knows it would not happen in his realities, he is still not sure whether or not it would happen in his teacher’s. In short, Khasru may have found himself trapped through the very nature of this assignment into getting things “wrong.” On the one hand, he has been told to bring “realism” to his story. On the other hand, he may not be sure what—or whose—realism to bring. In the end, he seems to bring his own where he thinks that fits, and yet his work is still “corrected”; he brings what he thinks might be the teacher’s where that fits, and that is also “corrected.” As Morgan Dalphinis went on to say in his address to the NAME conference (1988), immigrant children are expected to learn in their new schools “but not to learn in relation to items in their own culture.”

The second session ends with the support teacher giving Khasru two instructions: “Well, take it home with you, Khasru, think about what we’ve said, and see if you can make Chapter 1 any better”; and “Also, you could start work on Chapter 2. It’s really good so far. I’m really looking forward to finding out how you and your girlfriend get on. Well done. Excellent work.”

By the end of the next lesson, Khasru has made no alterations to part one of his story, nor has he started work on part two. The support teacher, a warm, friendly man who has an excellent rapport with all his pupils, expresses his disappointment and urges Khasru not to let a potentially good piece of work “slip away.” They agree that by the following lesson Khasru will have come up with some preliminary work on part two. This agreement is broken by Khasru. Soon, other bilingual children in the class are making great demands on both teachers. The Easter holiday comes and goes. By the end of it, Khasru still only has the second draft of the first part of his story in his examination folder. The class teacher decides Khasru has had long enough on the project and it is time to move on to something new. The story never gets completed.

To say that Khasru has given up because his story has been appropriated by his teacher, because it is no longer his, offers, of course, a partial explanation of what has happened. I want to argue that something even more worrying has happened here, however, that may well have far more serious consequences. When a teacher tells an immigrant child (one could argue, any child), “This is not true to life,” he or she often means, “This is not true to my life,” and thus clearly implies, from where the child sits, “My life is important, yours is not; my experience of reality is right, yours is faulty; my way of representing reality is acceptable, yours needs improving.” The poor self-image that such discourses create in children like Khasru, however patient and caring teachers may appear on the surface, is one that may never be shaken off. There is a very real danger that such children will grow up not thinking, “Yes, they do and see things differently here,” but “Yes, they do see things properly here”—and that consequently, school-learning will always be that much harder for them: for it is surely easier to learn new ways that are set into a framework where they can coexist with existing ways than it is to learn new ways that must simply replace old ones; psychologically, the problem is very different.

To avert both these dangers, schools must clearly work hard to develop and to adopt new styles of pedagogy: styles that will encourage the development of required expertise without promoting the corresponding, and all too prevalent, loss of faith. Researchers, meanwhile, and teacher-researchers, need to produce detailed examinations of pedagogies that will be both helpful and accessible to practitioners and that will stimulate critical discussion of existing practices. Government, local authorities, and school administrators must ensure that time is made available for such research and discussion, and recognize, along with researchers, that while teachers must bear some of the responsibility for what goes on in their classrooms, they are by no means autonomous in their operations, having to work within whatever constraints the education system imposes upon them. It is those restraints, of course, that often contribute most powerfully to conflicts between our educational ideals and the actuality of our day-to-day classroom practice.

Alex Moore is a research officer at King’s College, London University, now studying the impact of computers on student learning. He participated in the U.S.-U.K. cross-cultural writing exchange discussed in the Summer 1989 issue of The Quarterly.