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‘Sydney harbour water has just the right amount of salt for soup’: Englishes in fictionalized biographical writing

ABSTRACT

‘Sorry of my English,’ begins Xiaolu Guo’s multi-award winning novel, A Concise English-Chinese Dictionary for Lovers (2007), which follows the central character’s year in London learning English and falling in love. Countless submissions for assessment by the over 228,000 international students currently studying at Australian universities (AEI 2013) end with a similar apology. While readers and critics embraced Guo’s ‘broken’ English in this fiction as ‘translational writing’ (Gilmour 2012), many international students attract criticism for their efforts to communicate in English. This is compounded by a tendency to stereotype them as uncritical, rote- and passive-learners who are linguistically unprepared for their study. Arguing against this tide, this article explores the notion of multiple Englishes in a project where the creative use of the English language in writing fictionalized but ultimately autobiographical accounts of international students’ Australian experience was encouraged rather than repressed. Their production, moreover, demonstrates how Learners of English as an Alternative Language have the capacity to express important insights that are particularly relevant to cultural identity, transformation and understanding in a compelling and often poetic way today.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The first line of Xiaolu Guo’s novel, *A Concise English-Chinese Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) states, ‘Sorry of my English’ and so, in these or other words of similar meaning, end countless submissions written by the over 228,000 international students currently studying at Australian universities (AEI 2013). Over twenty per cent of students at Australian

universities are international learners and the majority are studying in English, which is their second or third language, a situation that is common in western countries (UNESCO 2012). Written in the first person ‘learner’ English of its central character, *A Concise English-Chinese Dictionary for Lovers* records a year in London where a woman, Zhang, who has been sent to London by her parents to learn English, falls in love. Through this creative writing, Guo (who was born in 1973 in China) powerfully explores themes of learning and knowledge, nostalgia and alienation, memory and self-reinvention and the difficulties that individuals – and even lovers – can find in communicating. *A Concise English-Chinese Dictionary for Lovers* has been very successful both with readers and with critics. It has been published in numerous editions for various western markets and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2007. Guo has been praised for her ‘translational writing’ and the way in which she produces a literary text that represents the traces of multiple languages alongside the primary English in which it is written (Gilmour 2012). Readers and reviewers also admired how the text portrays Zhang’s English gradually improving through the course of her year in the United Kingdom (Ommundsen 2008). Yet, this kind of translational writing and improvement through time are not the elements on which most Learners of English as an Alternative Language (LEAL) are assessed by their university teachers who conventionally grade students for a single subject in a specific term and therefore have no opportunity and often very little reason to pay any attention to language development across a year or even during the entirety of the degree undertaken.

In this discussion, it is also important to recognize that whatever language individuals use, and whatever their individual competence, everyone uses language creatively to describe and engage with the world by constructing and interpreting semantic chunks from the vocabulary and syntax available in their working memory. LEAL rely on a more restricted English resource than many native speakers, but have alternative (and often multiple) language options available to them to express meaning. These choices can, however, also impact on their English utterances and be read as ‘poor English’ rather than clever, creative expression. Examples from our own experience include: ‘[T]omorrow is newer than today’ and ‘[S]hallow is when the top of the water is very near the bottom of the water’. Following Guo’s lead and inspired by Brian Castro’s liberating attitude to teaching creative writing to non-native English speakers (2011), these texts can be read in terms of their meaning, and replete with creative, poetic potential in terms of expression, but these qualities might well pass unremarked if submitted in an academic essay for university-level assessment.

With these issues in mind, we recruited volunteer LEAL from a Sydney university campus to work on a creative writing project which aimed to concentrate both writers and academic staff on the meaning of LEAL's work, rather than the correctness of their expression in terms of standard English. Participants engaged in two creative writing workshops and ongoing individual consultations with the academic staff involved. Draft submissions received from the writers were then reviewed by the project team and redeveloped by researchers in a number of cycles over a period of twelve months. The resultant pieces of writing are currently in the process of being published in a print book, which will also be available as an e-book. The remainder of this discussion looks to the writings produced in terms of what they can reveal about the potential of recognizing 'Englishes' in student (and others') writing.

KEY FINDINGS: THEMES AND CONTENT

All writers adopted the first person point of view and this was a natural and authentic response to the questions we posed about cultural experiences and transformation and their exposure to Guo's work. It was not always clear if this was autobiographical writing or fact-based fiction and we did not attempt to unravel such fusions, so we categorized these as 'fictionalized autobiographies'. However, it was clear from our discussions with the writers that their narratives were based on personal experience.

Although our LEAL writers were asked in our initial discussions to focus on learning as well as cultural transformation for their main topic of writing, none of the narratives were set within the formal education context. Instead these were set in the public spaces – streets, buses, trains and workplaces – of the Sydney community which implied that these students identified this environment as the site of their most compelling interactions in terms of transformation. Their studies when mentioned were very much a means to an end, part of a 'dream' of independence and a 'challenge' which required 'resolve' and 'determination' but not the sites of compelling interaction or experience.

Each of the students independently produced a story in which their narrator has one or more negative experiences with Australian friends, employers or strangers. (Teachers were also absent from these narratives.) These experiences are negative in the sense that the narrators' expectations are disappointed but, on reflection, each narrator takes something from the experience that develops their understanding of both themselves and others. Examples of this include:

I have found my ability to hedge and manage risk is considerably enhanced. My ability to recognize and understand different people and situations has greatly improved; and suddenly my English level has improved as a result of my interaction with the local people. (student writer)

I really feel that god exist here because every time when I feel depressed, someone who are strangers will do something to make you feel better. (student writer)

I wondered if there were poor people in Australia who lived on the streets like in Brazil. What I saw on a Winter's night in Sydney, gave me a culture shock I will never forget ... the pair of blue eyes walked out into the night to somewhere under Australia's protective wing, which in addition to feeding the homeless, protects their right to live the way they want to. While reflecting on this, I began thinking about the Brazilian homeless. They are left to experience nightmares during their days and nights because of the lack of government assistance. (student writer)

There were many other instances.

Each of these narrators encountered challenging experiences with strangers, co-workers and/or friends which they depicted as influential on their image of Australian culture and their understanding of themselves and their own values and skills. As authors, they self-referenced their own shortcomings with humour: 'zombie backpacker' (student writer), 'a woman who doesn't do housework very often' (student writer), 'bad-tempered Chinese girl' (student writer), 'a twenty-eight year old female, a typical product of Chinese single-child policy, unmarried' (student writer) and a 'good life-planner' (student writer). Although each experiences some disappointment either in what happens to them or what happens to others, they also positively connect with strangers and take constructive lessons from these experiences, acknowledging their own encultured limitations.

The key theme expressed in all these fictionalized biographical narratives is living in a different country with its set of cultural tropes and expectations. The difficulty of negotiating a new culture to achieve financial independence and a degree of integration with a community that operates on a different set of rules was commonly expressed in the stories. The sense of exploitation and failure from attending unpaid trial work shifts (usually in the hospitality industry and often unsuccessful) were also dominant themes for a number of the writers. However, in the face of their varied trials and disappointments, each of these student writers demonstrates powerful determination to persist in their efforts to integrate with the community, often drawing on their own cultural traditions, including religious beliefs, to sustain them. Examples here include the following brief statements: 'God bless the homeless

of Commonwealth Australia!’ (student writer) and ‘Nobody could bear the never-ending loneliness, except maybe God’ (student writer).

Food also features as core content and is used as a way of providing an opportunity to describe emotion, as when a fledgling waiter describes her fear of getting burned when carrying heavy plates of sizzling steak to restaurant diners. Food is also harnessed as a key element of descriptive writing in these stories. Sydney Harbour, with its famed bridge and Opera House, is the most visited attraction in Australia and has inspired much tired and hackneyed description in prose and visual image. In this context one of the project participants’ descriptions – ‘Sydney harbour water has just the right amount of salt for soup’ (student writer) – from which we take the title of this presentation, is arresting and original.

KEY FINDINGS: FORMAL ELEMENTS

In their stories, students mobilized a series of non-English literary conventions. One of the Chinese writers, for instance, adopted an encultured literary convention derived from Ming dynasty storytelling which requires sections (or chapters) to be introduced with couplet titles, such as:

Chai Jin accommodates guests in Henghai County
Wu Song fights a tiger on Jingyang Ridge (Bordhal 2003: 3).

An acclaimed contemporary Chinese writer, Mo Yan, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, continues this tradition in his recent novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (2006). Our student writer used the following titles and subheadings: ‘The Stubborn Girl and the Deceitful Restaurant Manager’, ‘The Asian Cultural Tradition Rams into Western Freedom’, ‘The Battle of the Final Exam’, and ‘My First Warm Christmas and New Year Festival’ (student writer). Such textual features demonstrate a blending of literary traditions from separate cultures in a narrative written in English. Another writer utilized elements of magic realism – a literary convention commonly identified with the literature of her home country in South America – in her narrative. While we identified various examples of such amalgamation of literary convention in many of the stories, of course there may also have been such elements present that we did not recognize.

All stories were culturally and linguistically reflexive and referred to language and incorporated terms or concepts from other cultures/languages. Creative expressions were

plentiful and demonstrated syntactic as well as semantic alternatives to standardized English:

One man had two damaged teddy bears over his chest, under his clothes. A grown up child with no memories of past, present or future. Suddenly he got on his knee as if he would pray for St Madeleine, and then screamed a few sentences in his own invented language, saying good night to the bears which lived inside his awakened dreams. (student writer)

This kind of matter never happened on me even if I had been living on the world for nearly thirty years. (student writer)

Jade green trees exercise themselves with the wind under dazzling sunshine. (student writer)

All texts similarly incorporated elements of non-standard English grammar, yet each not only makes perfect sense but is highly engaging. In addition, highly formal English is sometimes blended with casual expression reflecting the mix of the writers' experience within academic as well as suburban Australian community contexts. A clear example of this follows: 'even many Chinese companies are not willing to hire me because I was too fresh here ... but I know I am not young. I want to reduce my parents' economic burden' (student writer).

Some stories included short sections of dialogue that were mostly in English, but with some other languages occasionally interspersed. Expressions from other languages are also evident as in the following excerpt describing the Sydney airport customs checkpoint:

The smart and loyal dog stood like a general in front of suitcase commanding the policewoman to investigate it. She carefully tried to find anything suspicious to show loyalty to her best friend. Then I ended up confessing to her that I had thrown away an Arabian apple from Dubai because there was a sign informing that foreign apples are not welcomed in Australia. After my gourmet confession, both the *perro* and its best friend had nothing more to declare but 'welcome'. *Gracias, mis amores!!!* Once again came up to my mind the idea of 'kissing the land' *pero* I thought that I would have other opportunities to express my humility and gratitude for Australia. (student writer)

Creative use of language is also evident in figurative strategies the students used including metaphors and analogies that draw on experience of other cultures and climates:

It just like someone sent you the fire in a cold snowy winter. (student writer)

The seven colours of the rainbow, like a silky belt, connect the land and sky after a short shower. (student writer)

All of them were from the kingdom of the homeless and their blue-eyed poverty was simply looking for bread and soup. (student writer)

In this manner, whilst these texts make sense, they challenge, and perhaps unsettle, the expectations of readers of conventional English. They often reveal and enact an approach to English usage that is heavily influenced by other languages and other cultures and by the writers' experiences as learners. Despite the inherent sophistication of such language usage and the fact that Guo's text is an example of where literary acclaim can follow such usage (Ommundsen 2008), such examples are often read as 'poor' English by teachers in Australia and other Anglophile countries.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: MICRO ISSUES

These narratives demonstrate how LEAL students clearly experience great personal difficulty in adjusting to their isolation and new independence as they struggle to integrate with the general community, a social action which is frequently attempted in workplaces. The tone of two stories in particular (written by non-scholarship students) is harassed and often disgruntled as they consider their failures and misfortunes, although each ends with a reflective appreciation of personal growth through these difficult experiences. It has been pointed out that international students are frequently lonely (Sawir et al. 2008) and encounter significant risk (Nyland et al. 2010) and that domestic and international student cohorts do not readily integrate (Owens & Loomes 2009, 2012). Due to personal stoicism and a tendency not to complain or self-identify as needing assistance, it is easy to underestimate the personal sacrifices and emotional duress experienced by many international students who are LEAL.

We did not specifically direct students to give vent to such experiences through their creative writing; however, providing an avenue whereby they can be expressed in creative texts provides a range of advantages. It allows readers (who can include academic staff as well as other students) to gain better insight into the cross-cultural experience of and develop greater empathy for the cultural sojourner. Furthermore, the act of authoring such texts can provide a focused opportunity for LEAL to reflect on and evaluate their frustrating or negative experiences and identify gains through transformations. In this sense the process and the product are empowering both in terms of valuing the LEAL voice and engaging LEAL more intimately and on a personal level with members of the university and the general community. Comments from the survey conducted at the end of the project reflect

these benefits:

It is a very enjoyable and useful experience of taking part in the creative writing project. Through this project, not only I make lots of friends such as Alison, Donna and other staffs and students, but also it helped me go through for what I have had experienced and generate recognition to life. (student writer)

I enjoyed a lot because it was a good opportunity of reflecting about my experience as a foreign student in Australia and a fantastic way to improve my writing. (student writer)

Yeah, it is changeling as we are not native English speaker, however, enjoyable as I found out my feelings and thought were able to be expressed in another Language [sic]. It is unique feeling. (student writer)

Such comments have encouraged us to consider extending this project with other students at another of our university campuses and with students who are studying at other universities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: MACRO ISSUES

The fact that our LEAL writers set all their stories in the public spaces of Sydney and identified this environment as the site of their most compelling interactions should be of interest to all those involved in international education. As mentioned above, their studies, when included in these stories, were imaged as a means to an end of ultimate independence, but were not described the sites of compelling interaction or experience. This suggests that educational providers should provide more social and cultural activities for their international students.

For at least two decades, the Australian government and scholars in the international education field have emphasized the critical importance of providing opportunities for continuing language development for all students – but particularly LEAL – across the university curriculum, yet this remains a project that has yet to be widely taken up by academics and universities. With this in mind, we raised questions with authors about what the meaning of their writing was, if this was obscure, but resisted the reflex to ‘correct’ expression into a standardized English – recognizing however that that impulse is deeply ingrained.

CONCLUSION

Although our participants’ stories were not intended to represent auto-ethnographically ‘true’ accounts of their personal experience, they provide compelling reading as both imaginative

and (fictionalized) autobiographical narratives. They showed that in terms of cultural learning, study was a component of their university work, but that the real learning took place outside the classroom. We found that encouraging and supporting LEAL to write creative texts not only stimulated their willingness to thus express themselves but also mobilized a (perhaps previously untapped) interest in creative writing, with all participants expressing interest in further workshops and opportunities to produce creative texts. It also certainly improved their capacity to express themselves in their learned language. On our part, we found that being involved in such an activity went some way towards addressing the dominant tendency to critique, correct and reject the voices of LEAL.

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