Student, interrupted: A tale of two would-be writers

Linda Lonon Blanton *

University Honors Program, LIB 301, University of New Orleans, Lakefront Campus, New Orleans, LA 70148, USA

What I learned recently brings to mind the saga played out in the book Girl, Interrupted in which a mental patient nears a catastrophic breakdown as forces in her life conflate and collide. While no single force determines her fate, altogether—like an avalanche that starts with one small stone—they threaten to overtake her. In somewhat the same way, forces, some set in motion years ago, menace the course of two ESL students whose writing difficulties I set out to understand.¹ While a full report of the study can wait, I want here to explain an aspect that I find especially instructive—and troubling.

Let me say at the outset that, jokes aside, I am not analogizing the psychiatric setting of the story, whose title I mirror, either to the students or schools they attended. Still, certain parallels apply. Looking back, as with the girl, no one foresaw that the students’ progression—in particular, their literacy development—would go so badly awry. Nor, as with the girl, was the damage done all at once but, rather, resulted from an entwining of circumstances over time. As with the girl, the students’ predicament severely limits current options and jeopardizes future possibilities. Also, as in the girl’s case, in the lives of these students, well-meaning individuals—in their case, mostly teachers—contributed to and even participated in shaping their present situation, seemingly unaware of the students’ inexorable slide toward the institutional edge. But first some background.

¹ Over a year’s time, I met separately with the students, spending approximately 25 h with them, all told. I asked for and received their permission to quote them and write about them.

1. Brief history: Meseret

Meseret (not her real name) is a 24-year-old from Ethiopia, who, with her mother and siblings, came to New Orleans eight years ago to join her father, then a doctoral student in...
international finance. Although Meseret’s home language is Amharic, she was not new to English when she arrived. In Ethiopia, she had started English in third grade; and by the time she reached seventh grade, all courses—except Amharic, PE, and agriculture—were taught by local teachers in the medium of English. (In pointing out that the teachers were “local,” i.e., Ethiopian, I do not disparage the competence of those teaching in English who themselves are L2 speakers of English. My sense is rather that English seemed tangential to Meseret, her peers, and teachers even though it was their medium of teaching and learning.) The system during Meseret’s time is a change from her father’s time, she said, when children started English in first grade and were taught all subjects by British (i.e., native English speaking) teachers.

In Ethiopian high school, Meseret studied chemistry, math, biology, geology, history, and accounting—all taught in English. About English class, Meseret said it consisted primarily of grammar drills. Reading was for the purpose of answering comprehension questions from the textbook and being quizzed on content. And writing consisted of filling in the blanks in the workbook. Meseret said she and her peers were not allowed to give their own opinions about a text, either orally or in writing, but were expected to “say what the story said.” She “wasn’t so good in English,” she said, but needed only 50% to pass.

Meseret’s father had been in the United States for five years when his family joined him. Meseret said he was upset upon their arrival to discover that she and her siblings weren’t more fluent in English. She had over the time of her father’s absence either communicated with him on the telephone in Amharic or responded to his inquiries with such short answers that he had no idea how limited her English actually was.

Once in New Orleans, Meseret enrolled directly in public high school, where she was placed in tenth grade. (I’ve taken students’ memories and reflections at face value, checking only “official” records in regard to university courses and grades.) Meseret said that, despite her years of schooling in English, she didn’t really know the language when she arrived in New Orleans and was actually “scared of it.” She explained this away by saying that neither she nor her classmates in Ethiopia ever dared speak English, except for one friend who “tried to speak it,” and “everyone in the class would laugh at her.” She estimated it took about six months in New Orleans before she mustered the courage to open her mouth and speak.

In 10th grade in New Orleans, Meseret was registered in ESL, but also in regular PE and algebra. To catch up, she doubled up by also enrolling that year in both regular (i.e., non-ESL) English I and II, since the state requires four years of regular English for high school graduation. She sat through both English classes without the proficiency to do much, if any, work, she said. She studied the required subject of world history in ESL class.

In 11th grade, Meseret enrolled in Algebra II, regular science (biology), and regular English III, the latter taught by an ESL teacher in a pull-out class for students unable to keep up in the mainstream class. Meseret said the pull-out teacher required “lots of writing”—journals, papers, and responses to stories—but characterized the feedback as grammar correction, with “lots of rewriting to correct the sentences.” Throughout, she had an ESL aide to help with homework in all classes.

During her junior and senior years, Meseret took the state-mandated LEAP (“Louisiana Educational Assessment Program,” an exit exam) three times before she passed it, after special tutoring, and was then given a high school diploma. The school felt pressure to graduate her “on time,” she said.
Upon high school graduation, Meseret entered the public university where I teach. She put herself directly into ESL without waiting for the proficiency test to place her there, because she needed it, she said. But when unexpectedly (from her perspective) the department enrolled her in intensive courses (a full 12 h), she thought “no way do I need this.” She said the ESL teacher herself said she didn’t need the 6-h listening/speaking component, but “made me take it anyway.”

Six semesters later, Meseret was still in ESL, having advanced only two levels: from the 12-h intensive program (all skills), to a 6-h non-intensive course (reading and writing), to a 3-h writing course (ENGL 0188). This last placement wasn’t one she achieved by exam, but through an appeal, tearfully made, that she was so discouraged by such slow passage through the program that she intended to quit.

During this time of Meseret’s struggles in ESL, the university was sending her very mixed messages about what it takes for a student to succeed. On the one hand, she was being told her reading–writing skills were below par for matriculation into credit-bearing freshman composition and a full schedule of mainstream courses. On the other hand, she saw she could pass some of the mainstream courses she was allowed to take. In freshman-level anthropology, she got a B; and in psychology, a C. The following semester, in sophomore-level economics, she got a C.

Overall, though, at the point where my study stopped, Meseret’s grade point average (GPA) was a miserable 1.535 (on a 4-point scale), a record that put her on academic probation. Despite how well she did in ESL class that semester, if she failed to achieve a 2.0 in her other courses (and she was enrolled in sophomore-level anthropology, freshman-level math, and freshman-level philosophy), she would be dropped from the university. So even though Meseret had achieved sophomore status in her major, pre-pharmacy, without matriculating out of ESL, she was at the point of academic breakdown.

2. Brief history: Tran

Tran, his parents, two brothers, and a sister arrived in the United States in 1991, after six months in a refugee camp in the Philippines. Tran (not his real name) was 13. They went first to Texas, and some months later joined people in New Orleans they knew from their village in the south of Vietnam. In Vietnam, Tran’s mother had been a third-grade teacher; his father, the owner of a produce shop. Being older, Tran’s siblings had already finished high school by the time the family left. Upon their arrival in New Orleans, Tran entered eighth grade at a public junior high school near his home.

At the junior high, Tran was able to pass required English I and II because writing was, in his words, “fill in the blank.” He did well in math, he said, because he had always been good in math. And in earth sciences, he was mostly responsible for definitions, so he looked up words in his Vietnamese dictionary, translated, memorized, and made it through. He also credited other Vietnamese students, who had immigrated earlier and whose English was better, with helping him get by. After completing junior high and moving to a nearby high school to begin tenth grade, Tran was placed in ESL and some regular courses. By eleventh grade, he was fully mainstreamed.
By the fall of 1997, Tran had graduated from high school and was enrolled in my university, where I first met him in an intensive ESL reading course I was teaching. (I do not absolve myself of responsibility for contributing to his current circumstance.) Tran passed ESL that semester and most subsequent ones, advancing level by level, until he reached advanced ESL composition (ENGL 0189), whose exit, if he could get that far, would indicate placement in regular freshman English. At this point Tran got stuck, failing the last course in the ESL sequence three semesters in a row. He failed each time “because of grammar,” he said.

After shifting from intensive to non-intensive ESL courses—to where he got stuck—Tran took an array of mainstream courses, but, like Meseret, only those that don’t require freshman English placement. As with Meseret’s, Tran’s academic experience gave him mixed messages of what it takes to succeed at the university. In some science and most humanities courses, Tran did poorly: for example, a D in biology, F in economics, D in music appreciation. Yet, playing to his strengths, he did well in the hard sciences and in math and engineering: a B in chemistry, B in trigonometry, A in algebra, A in engineering statistics. One semester he earned four A’s in sophomore- and junior-level engineering courses. Overall, through trial and error, Tran learned to be selective enough to enroll in courses he was likely to pass and smart enough to drop them when he realized he couldn’t: his record soon became littered with Ws (“withdraw”).

After a time, Tran’s problem became not his GPA—which was a 2.769 (on a 4.0 scale) at the point my study stopped—but that he had painted himself into a corner. He simply ran out of courses he could take that didn’t first require completion of the two-semester freshman composition sequence. That is, he hadn’t yet begun freshman English although he had reached senior status in engineering. (Note that Tran is not unlike a few of the students described by Byrd and Nelson, 1995, i.e., students with successful records in academic programs but unsuccessful on writing exams. But their solution—after Ruetten, 1994—of a writing portfolio as an alternative to continually failing the exam would not work for Tran. The type of writing, i.e., the English essay, expected on the exam is the type that would also fill a portfolio, and Tran has no more success with class-based English-essay writing than he does with the exam. See my later discussion.)

Only in fall 2000, did Tran finally, finally, squeak through on the ESL exit test and reach the point of entry to freshman composition. (Mind you, this is after three years at the university.) Despite my efforts to convince him otherwise, he did not register for freshman composition the following semester, scared as he was to attempt what he had struggled so long to achieve.

3. So what?

Although my research was almost singularly focused on understanding Meseret’s and Tran’s current writing difficulties, during the months of working with them I unearthed, bit by bit, certain details of their prior schooling that—when they coalesced in my mind—staggered me in their similarity, as well as in the power to explain, in part, what had gone so wrong. Remember that Meseret’s last full year of instruction in a language (Amharic) in which she was fluent and literate (as expected for her age and grade level) was sixth
grade—at about the age of 11. And for Tran, since he received little instruction in the refugee camp and no instruction during the subsequent months in Fort Worth (losing, all told, a year’s time), his last full year of “real” schooling—i.e., in the medium of a language in which he also was fluent and literate (as expected for his age and grade level)—was in his village in Vietnam, when he was 11 or 12.

Given these students’ characterizations of subsequent schooling (e.g., fill in the blank, copy answers to textbook questions, translate and memorize), it is my perception that when Tran left Vietnam and Meseret shifted into English-medium schooling in Ethiopia, both students’ literacy development basically stopped. And during a long and critical time thereafter—through middle school, high school, and into college—their so-called textual interactions (Tran’s in the US; Meseret’s in Ethiopia and the US) took place in a language they neither spoke well nor read and wrote much at all. In other words, from about sixth grade on, they experienced a virtual absence of meaningful textual interactions and intellectual engagement (through written texts), elements that are key to anyone’s full literacy construction. (I’m assuming that literacy development begun in L1 can resume in L2, when optimal learning environments prevail, although I agree with Cummins et al., 1984, and Bosher & Roweckamp, 1998, that the optimal situation would be for immigrant students to develop academic skills in the second language on the back of fully-developed academic skills in the native language. But the latter was not in the cards for Tran and Meseret.)

Once their ties with schooling in the medium of the home language were broken, no contextual demands were placed on Meseret and Tran that would have furthered their first literacy (see Hornberger, 1994). Yet, in English-medium instruction, with course content reduced to pablum and English language proficiency at a minimum, no contextual demands involving the reading and writing of texts could be effectively fulfilled in the new language either. To repeat, for both students, literacy development basically stopped at the end of elementary school. I cannot tell you how struck I am by this coincidence of timing.

The more I grasped Tran’s and Meseret’s past histories and current dilemma, the more I began to question what we are doing in college-level ESL programs, especially in programs that serve, whole or in part, immigrant students whose literacy development, or lack thereof, seems of little concern in program design, curriculum development, or assessment and placement. I want to address these concerns generally because there are, no doubt, other Trans and Meserets among our students. I also want to address them because it is in thinking more broadly that we can see more clearly the implications of Meseret’s and Tran’s truncated literacy development.

After wrestling with the broader concerns, I return to Meseret and Tran to lay out what I see as some of their instructional needs. I end with an update of the students’ status.

4. Issues in academic ESL programs

In ESL programs in college (as opposed to community-based programs), there is, in my experience, an almost-singular focus on written performance. In placement, little attention is paid to a student’s speaking proficiency or the role of orality in writing instruction (Hornberger, 1994). Even though students are sometimes tested for listening
comprehension, for all intents and purposes it is only the writing that counts. Further, academic ESL programs traditionally operate their placement procedures on the assumption that all skills develop in parallel fashion—e.g., a student placed in advanced listening and/or speaking class also “needs” advanced reading and/or writing, and vice versa. (Remember Meseret’s initial university ESL placement.) However, students of the 1.5 generation2 like Meseret and Tran who come to college speaking fluent English, albeit flawed, force us to question such assumptions.

As far as the field (research/literature) goes, we simply do not understand at any profound level the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and writing development (Carson, 2001, p. 192). Granted, from SLA research we do understand somewhat the nature of how human beings achieve speaking a language. And we understand the distinction between picking up a language and formal instruction in speaking—that is, in acquisition, as distinct from learning (Krashen, 1982, p. 10). But we little understand how students accomplish (acquire? learn?) writing a second language even when they have achieved proficiency in writing their first.3 SLA research and theory, focusing as it does on the acquisition of (spoken) communicative competence, has not, except for Krashen (1984), extended to writing to any degree. (Encouraging, though, is Harklau, 2002.)

More to the point, as a field we have paid even less attention to the predicament of L2 adult students with limited proficiency in writing their first language, although they have long populated school programs in the United States. To their disadvantage, these students are often lumped together in remedial writing courses with undereducated L1 writers, whose relationship to English is culturally and linguistically different. Or they get lumped together with international students, whose L2 writing and speaking proficiencies may actually be developing apace and who actually are foreign to the school locale. In sum, as far as the research and literature go, largely invisible are these immigrant L2 students whose written English proficiency lags far behind their spoken fluency, but whose L2 writing, however, deficient it is considered to be, may actually be more developed than their L1 writing. (This lack of visibility is changing, though. See Benz, 2002; Bosher & Rowekamp, 1998; Harklau et al., 1999; McFarland, 2001; Zamel & Spack, 1998.)

We are largely in the dark about how these 1.5 students might achieve a degree of reading-writing proficiency in L2 that—due to circumstances beyond their control—they never achieved in L1. Here we are talking about literacy issues, not composition concerns. Since, for Meseret and Tran, the kinds of textual interactions that build profound literacy did not continue beyond elementary schooling, their L1 literacy development basically halted there. And because of the nature of their school instruction in L2—i.e., force-fed content and writing performance tasks for the purpose of error correction—literacy development for them did not resume to any meaningful degree in L2, assuming it can “jump” languages. It is important to note that Meseret’s and Tran’s backgrounds provide

2 The term “Generation 1.5” was coined by Rumbaut and Ima (1988) to characterize USA-educated ESL students “because of traits and experiences that lie somewhere in between those associated with the first or second generation” (quoted in Harklau et al., 1999, p. vii).

3 Although Krashen’s work (1984) hardly influenced writing instruction at all, I think he is right in theorizing that reading powerfully impacts the development of literacy. It serves as the primary source of comprehensible input in the same way that (others’) speech serves a learner’s oral development.
negative examples of the correctness of Bosher and Rowekamp’s emphasis (1998) on “uninterrupted L1 educational background for the successful acquisition of a second language for academic purposes” (p. 36) (also Cummins, 1979).

With college ESL writing instruction traditionally focused not on literacy development but on composition (which presumes an L1 competence they do not have), these students are forced into a defensive posture. They are expected to accomplish in ESL writing courses what they cannot. For them, we have institutionalized failure. Their needs are beyond us. They slowly self-destruct. We carry on, doing what we have traditionally done, which is to focus on written performance, on written form.

5. Learning about literacy development from young children

Even if little is known about literacy development among adult students in academic settings, quite a bit is known about “first” literacy in L2 in school settings where students are too young to have previously experienced literacy instruction in any language. (See Blanton, 1998; Buckwalter & Lo, 2002; Hudleson, 1989; Huss, 1995.) This research may prove instructive for the Meserets and Trans in our classrooms. For example, in my study of L2 children in a multilingual Moroccan school (Blanton, 1998), four- and five-year olds thrived in classrooms that were abuzz with literacy-fostering activities.

In spending time with the children and their teachers, I gained insight into the kinds of learning environments in which literacy blossoms forth, even in a child’s second (or third or fourth) language. In literacy-rich classrooms—where children wrote as they could, even before it became conventional enough to be read by their teachers, and read, even when pretending—I discovered two factors that seemed essential to this growth: (1) the intuitive-intellectual sense of a child’s teacher to know the kind of assistance needed by each child, in true Vygotskian fashion (1978); and (2) the teacher-practice of negotiating this assistance through talk, through what I call (after Steward, 1995) verbal mediation (Blanton, 1998, pp. 137–143; see also Heath, 1991).

Later, in re-analyzing my data, I discovered another factor, one that overarches the other two and is critical to understanding literacy development (Blanton, 2002). In positing an affective-intellectual “space” between teacher and child, I claim that the engine that best drives literacy development is synchronicity, a dynamic created by teacher and child with each other and in that space when optimal conditions prevail (pp. 304–305).

When the dynamic is created, I claim, it allows verbal mediation and the teacher’s well-timed assistance, among other kinds of organic instruction, to positively and dramatically impact the literacy process (p. 302). In other words, given sound instruction and feedback on the teacher’s part and interested participation on the child’s part, the crucial and added factor of teacher-child synchronicity—i.e., the child and teacher operating psychologically

---

4 My work builds on Steward (1995) and Vygotsky (1978). Steward posits verbal mediation (i.e., child–teacher “talk”) as a key element in literacy development (p. 77). Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development captures the concept of a learner’s unrealized potential versus realized potential (i.e., actual learning). The notion of synchronicity (i.e., student–teacher psychological and intellectual coherence) ties the two together: its presence explains how and when “talk” turns unrealized potential into actual learning—that is, how and when the child gets what he/she needs for literacy to “naturally” emerge.
and cognitively in coherence with each other—gives children the boost they need to develop literacy-promoting behaviors and confidently test out linguistic hypotheses, as they and their teachers relate and interact. It isn’t that children can’t develop literacy without this boost, they just don’t develop it as smoothly, quickly, or “naturally” (p. 305). The bottom line is this: relationships are fiercely fundamental to all learning, but serve, more specifically, as the critical lynchpin of rapid and successful literacy development (Fox, 1997).

6. Considering applications to Meseret and Tran

Back to Meseret and Tran. Are they like the children in my Morocco study? Well, no, because for one thing, the children are at the age- and grade-level where an L1 child would also be gaining literacy. So the school’s expectations of the L2 children, the images conveyed to them and to their teachers of who they are, and the instructional constructs in which they and their teachers operate, all jive.

To consider the untenable, if something were to go horribly wrong and the literacy development of these children were delayed until later childhood, it is uncertain if they would then achieve literacy so fully or easily. It is also uncertain if when literacy development is interrupted through full adolescence, as it has been for Meseret and Tran, it can or will resume and under what conditions. Can institutional contexts be created for Tran and Meseret, and those like them, to achieve the level of literacy expected of college-level students? This is an open question. It is, though, fairly certain that Tran’s and Meseret’s literacy development will not resume—cannot be “jump-started”—within the instructional framework of college composition, whether ESL or post-ESL.

7. Composition, not literacy

Composition instruction—by its nature, or at least as we know it—focuses on rhetorical and syntactic form, not on literacy development. (There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, if the instruction meets students’ needs.) This characterization of composition is borne out when we think about assumptions underlying curricula in K-12 and in higher education in the U.S. Students in elementary schools aren’t taught composition, of course. The earliest they likely encounter it is late in high school. To profit from rhetorical instruction—by which I mean formal lessons in text construction (e.g., crafting thesis statements in essays)—students need to have already achieved a certain level of literacy. In sum, traditional college composition instruction presumes to build on high school English

5 Even with (oral) language acquisition, there is no agreement among researchers as to whether or not, or for how long, humans retain the capacity to gain fluency in (other) languages. See Birdsong (1999) for opposing opinions on the “Critical Period Hypothesis.” We also do not know if SLA research can be extrapolated to adult literacy acquisition. In other words, is there a critical period during which humans can become fully literate, a period after which the chances of gaining full literacy are slim? Krashen (1984) claims that there is no reason to conclude that a “rigid critical period” exists (p. 30). Even after all this time, though, not enough research has been done for us to know.
courses, including essay writing. (College composition teachers complain bitterly if high school English teachers “haven’t done their jobs.”)

Not that instructional models are uniform, but college composition programs tend to follow one of four or so designs. Broadly viewed, composition is construed as writing across the disciplines, and/or inter-textual writing involving research and others’ ideas. Or it is taught as literary analysis, as writing about literature. Narrowly construed, it is viewed as expository and/or argumentative essay writing, a genre emphasizing analysis but limited in usefulness in post-secondary study. At worst, composition courses teach formulae for essay construction and provide practice to pass exit exams.

No matter how designed, college composition programs operate with a common underlying assumption: they are not, nor should they be, teaching students whose level of literacy has not developed beyond elementary school. Imagine a scenario of college instructors finding sixth and seventh graders—or, more to the point, students at a sixth or seventh grade literacy level—enrolled in freshman English, even in pre-freshman ESL composition.

More beyond belief, imagine college-level composition instructors thinking they could use their usual methods of teaching, same course materials, and same evaluation standards to teach such students. How exactly could that work? (This is not so exaggerated from the settings in which 1.5 students like Tran and Meseret find themselves.) Why do so many of these students fail? Because they are not at the point of being able to profit from composition instruction. They are not yet literate enough.

8. Literacy

Literate people—even if rusty or inexperienced or blocked as writers—know how to relate to texts. As simple-minded as it sounds to us who are literate, literate people know that writers create texts. They know they can disagree with what they read, relate it to a different topic, and/or apply what they’ve gotten from one text to another and/or to the world around them. They know they can talk and write about any of this. They know they can put themselves and their experiences and ideas into texts, can write about what they know, and assume that it will make sense to readers. They know this because that’s what makes them literate (Heath & Mangiola, 1991, pp. 40–41).

That’s what literacy is—a constellation of acquired attitudes and behaviors. (Only superficially is it the know-how of manipulating symbols on a page, i.e., of decoding.) Literate people have appropriated these behaviors from other readers and writers in the process of becoming readers and writers themselves. That’s what literate people do: read and write. That’s who they are: readers and writers. When readers and writers occupy the seats in our writing classes, composition as we know it can be taught. When they don’t, it cannot.

Meseret and Tran, as individuals who do not relate to the textual world as readers and writers, have little meaningful exposure to the look and feel of age/grade-appropriate texts in English; and they don’t read or write anything in their home languages either. Ultimately, they receive almost no input, nor have they for a very long time (since about sixth grade). It is not surprising that their writing results in persistent grammar errors, often with convoluted syntax that carries little discernible meaning (see Carson, 2001).
Tran and Meseret read only when they have to and then only assigned texts. And because they are forced on them, these texts have little potential for seeping into their pores, capturing their emotions, and allowing them to see and hear scenes and voices of textual people and places. Unlike for Tran and Meseret, when decoders become committed readers, then literate behaviors are becoming integral to their lives. Since this has never happened for Meseret and Tran, they remain minimally literate. Likely as not, little language rattles around in their heads, composing itself in wait for pen and paper to come together.

9. Politics of literacy

From the political point of view of the minimally literate, academic institutions persist in imposing traditional curricular constructs and academic expectations on non-traditional populations, whose needs go largely unrecognized. Not surprisingly, this hegemony results in negative outcomes for these students, whose aspirations and self-esteem are pulverized and whose academic progress is stymied. The answer to what to do about this dilemma ranges from radical restructuring to less radical curricular reform. (See Blanton, 1999; see also Cummins, 1994, on the politics of literacy.)

While I do not advocate that (all) standards be dropped for students like Meseret and Tran as they strive to mainstream into higher education, I do advocate rethinking pedagogy and curricular design. I say this while aware that some students, like Dang in Holmes and Moulton’s (1995) study, resist and dislike “alternative” classroom practices. (Dang wanted grammar correction in his dialogue journal writing.) Still, I claim that the traditional design of freshman writing programs, and entry into them from ESL, work only for those solidly literate in L1, even if new to academic writing in L2. Or even if rusty. Or even if poorly schooled in writing but primed and ready for instruction—i.e., those for whom earlier literacy education took place primarily away from school. Meseret and Tran, whose literacy development is truncated, even (in the sense of time) retarded, fit into none of these categories. Nor, for that matter, do a lot of L1 students.

And then there are the exit tests. While the tests we administer in our ESL and composition programs to students like Meseret and Tran confirm their “incompetence,” it is important not to mistake their appearance of incompetence for real incompetence. The former results from a constellation of events and circumstances over which students like these have no control. It’s not as if Meseret and Tran weren’t capable of becoming competent readers and writers; it’s that they aren’t. Absent are textual experiences that might have changed their current predicament.

As part of curricular reform, we need to take a hard look at these exams. They loom over students who have no prayer of passing them. And they dominate classrooms, perpetuating course designs and methodologies that do not work for students like Meseret and Tran. In case after case, I suspect, many are, more to the point, simply poorly designed exams that don’t work, period. (See Nelson & Byrd, 1998, for the problem with multiple-choice format tests.) I ask those whose L2 students are placed and passed or failed on the basis of such tests to look them over. Whenever, for example, I look at some reading components of tests my university uses, I wonder whoever decided that for people who aren’t
accomplished in reading, the texts they’re supposed to read were written by people who aren’t very accomplished in writing.

And writing exams are often prompted by topics, even titles, slapped impromptu on the board. I ask you to try writing instantaneously in response to someone else’s conceptualization of the world. See how difficult it is, how hard to generate content, how eked out your own production. You too might be asking “How many words?”

10. Meseret’s writing: a brief look

Two things strike me foremost about Meseret’s writing. First, there is little relationship between her syntactic and grammatical command of spoken English (although by no means 100% standard), and what she generates in writing. Even though Meseret wrote the following to lead off an assigned essay, in its mangled syntax and grammar it does not represent how she speaks:

When I see old men on TV who doesn’t know who to read and write remind me of my husband who was an articulate; very smart but don’t know how to write and read.

Moreover, the distinction is not simply between Meseret’s speaking and writing; it is also between her school writing and other writing. I mean that in her e-mails to me, her syntactic and grammatical control is qualitatively different. For example, six months before she wrote the sentence above, she e-mailed the following message to me:

... how are you doing? I am just fine. About my grade, yes, i called Mrs. Jean and told her about it and she told me they [are] going to change it but I called back [,] no change but I hope they [are] going to change it before school start[s]. I will let you know when the[y] change it. Thank[s] for ask[ing] about it.

(Meseret had been told she would be moved one level higher in the ESL program. In the e-mail, she was responding to my question about whether the move had actually occurred.) While missing bits and pieces, which I have inserted in brackets, Meseret’s flow and approximation of standard English is strikingly better in her e-mail, I would argue, than what appears in her school assignment.

When Meseret writes directly to me—or I assume to anyone—she knows what she wants to say, who she is saying it to, and why. In other words, she has a context and purpose, which any writer needs. In contrast, in the school assignment, Meseret said she was totally confused. (The writing prompt instructed her to “write from another character’s perspective.” She neither knew what this meant nor how to do it.) Plus, she had no reason or context for writing, even if she had understood the assignment.

The second striking aspect of Meseret’s school writing is how strangled she is by rhetorical form—by the five-paragraph mode she thinks she’s supposed to use. No matter what the assignment, Meseret makes every effort to turn it in “First . . . Then . . . Finally . . . In conclusion . . .” Granted, the format might be considered legitimate for some English/school essays, but then Meseret works so hard to shoehorn every topic into the form that she sabotages any chance of making sense.
I remember one piece of writing she asked me to look at. In typical fashion, she had marched through three places to visit (in Ethiopia), without once letting the reader know that she was writing about her own home country. When, following my suggestions, she wrote another draft in which she described places in Ethiopia she, herself, knew well, I could see a discernible shift in syntactic control—also a loosening of rigid form. I was moved by the incremental step she had taken. But my concern was that the school response to Meseret’s writing would be to clean up the grammar, which, I reasoned, would send her scurrying back to the safety of formulae. (It did.)

11. Tran’s writing: A brief look

For reasons not altogether clear, Tran’s writing shows more syntactic and grammatical control than does Meseret’s. Yet this distinction is relative, since Tran too has had great difficulty overcoming the hurdle of placement/exit exams. Still, he has at least finally made it to freshman English, which Meseret has not.

In school writing, Tran shows the commonplace difficulties with word endings (e.g., plural-, third-person singular-, and tense markers) I see among students whose first languages, like Vietnamese, operate according to phonological rules “prohibiting” consonants and/or consonant clusters in word-final position. For these students, what appears as an English-language grammar problem is actually a manifestation of a phonological conflict between L1 and L2. These students don’t acquire word-final consonants/clusters because they don’t hear them. Moreover, they don’t write them because the endings are non-existent in their acquired (oral) language (although writers can, when time permits, consciously edit for them). To compound the problem for students’ acquisition of standard English, in locales with large undereducated populations, such as New Orleans, native-English-language speech may not contain these word-final markers either. My point is that L2 students like Tran operate in a double bind when it comes to acquiring certain grammar features, the absence of which is sure to sink them on proficiency exams.

Another aspect of Tran’s school writing—i.e., the same mangled syntax that Meseret produces in her school writing—stems, I think, from the same cognitive disassociation. Take the following example:

It took me 10 min to write my full name. Every time I wrote on my check remind me of my son, who was education, intelligent, and hatefully illiterate people like me.

Tran wrote this in response to the same “point of view” prompt given to Meseret (but in a different class). Yet in an e-mail to me (about six weeks later), he wrote:

Hi . . . Can I make an appointment on Monday (Dec. 4) at 10:30 a.m. I pick these three topics to repair [prepare?] for my final: 1) It’s not too late to save the environment. 2) An Important change lesson about life I have learned from an Activity. 3) How people learn Gender Roles. I don’t have time to do these 3 topics today because I have to study biology first . . . . I take biology final before English . . . . I probably write my free writing on these topics tomorrow (Sunday), and let you see it on
Monday . . . You can give me opinions and ideas on Monday about my ideas in these essays.

I’ll see you on Monday, Tran.

The flow and syntactic control in Tran’s message says to me that when he generates language directly—as opposed to generating it in a vacuum—he approaches native-speaker competence. Besides, some of the errors Tran does make in the e-mail may be due to the nature of the medium. This is, after all, a piece of writing on which little is riding. Ironically, when Tran has the most to lose, he produces his worst writing because he is absent the very elements—e.g., context, purpose, engagement—that allow anyone to write with something to say.

Like Meseret’s, Tran’s school writing also shows the stranglehold of rhetorical form. As I say this, I recognize that it is grammar correctness, or lack thereof, and not strangling form that will determine his fate in freshman English.) In a failing essay Tran wrote in ESL class about the benefits of travel, he ends his first paragraph with “There are two main benefits of travel,” and then marches through “first” the “emotional, physical, and intellectual benefits of travel,” and then “finally,” the “economic benefit.” (For good measure, he turns the first benefit into three sub-benefits.)

What strikes me is that in following through with what he thinks the teacher wants (I’m not saying she actually does), Tran, like Meseret, writes himself out of the picture. There is no hint that he himself has traveled halfway around the world or has a trans-national view on the subject. (Instead, he creates an innocuous trip to the beach undertaken by two fictitious cousins.) When Tran is present and focused because he has something to say—that is, when his language is generated by a connection to a reader and to his own thinking process—then, I claim, Tran writes, will write, like the writer of the e-mail.

12. Contexts for adult literacy development: Lessons for Meseret and Tran

While I cannot say with certainty how to make a difference for the Meserets and Trans in our classrooms, I offer some thoughts:

- Aim for literacy immersion, for a context in which the reading and writing of texts has an integrative function. In other words, a task needs to be accomplished. To accomplish it, a text needs to be read or written.
- Since English functions almost exclusively as an oral language for Tran and Meseret, connections need to be created for them between the two different media, the different symbolic systems. Only then can they create divergences between their oral and written competencies. For example, Meseret and Tran might “tell” experiences and stories on audio tape. Then they write (about) the same content in response to a written prompt. If a transcript of the recorded content is made, comparisons can be made to the written content.

---

6 There are two ways to look at the sway of rhetorical form over the students’ writing: (a) without the level of literacy necessary to “manage” school writing tasks, they have only form to fall back on; or (b) not having acquired a sense of L2 written language through reading (as input), they substitute rhetorical form learned (as formulae) through composition instruction.
What I’m getting at is that Meseret and Tran have little operational awareness that their spoken English is more grammatically controlled, more syntactically sophisticated, than their written English. Even though any instructor knows that “good” academic writing is not just oral language written down, for Tran and Meseret that should be precisely the initial goal: to write the way they speak. (Since the medium of e-mail tacitly “permits” them to connect more closely to the way they speak, it may be, rather, that they construe school writing to disallow the connection.)

- To bring to a level of operational awareness how reading and writing function in an academically-successful life, Tran and Meseret might shadow more advanced students, document their observations, and figure out ways to incorporate these behaviors.
- In order not to go it alone, Meseret and Tran need to feel a sense of belonging to a learning community. Each person helps the other. No one is left to fail. The burden of each person’s success should not rest on his/her shoulders alone.
- Again, to help integrate literacy—literacy as a functioning, operational way of being in the world—Meseret and Tran need to be emotionally and intellectually engaged in socially based projects that require literate behaviors for their completion. For example, they undertake, as a service project, storytelling at a children’s center on campus. Or journal-writing sessions at a senior citizens’ center. As Fox (1997) says about real life literacy, it is always a “social event” (p. 122).
- Particularly if students like Meseret and Tran are bound by institutional constraints to enroll in essay-writing classes, alternative curricula need to be found. The construct for composition class could be genre investigation and not traditional modes (see Johns, 2003). In addition to essays—for which legitimate purposes need to be found—students write letters to the campus newspaper (and really send them), request information of a local tourism office (and send the requests), and annotate bibliographies of favorite books (and then everyone chooses a book to read, based on someone else’s annotation).
- Ultimately—and this is what can be learned from the children in Morocco—a context that best accomplishes literacy is literacy-rich. (Although circular, this notion is not redundant.) A literacy-rich context meets at least four needs of a literacy learner: (1) one-on-one verbal feedback and assistance; (2) tailor-made instruction—not a one-size-fits-all curriculum; (3) sheltered immersion in purposeful, meaningful textual experiences; and (4) emotional investment in a mutually-respectful educational partnership with a more advanced mentor, allowing for the creation of the dynamic I call synchronicity (Blanton, 2002, p. 304). (I recognize that this fourth need may be dismissed out of hand. In post-secondary institutions, teachers are “supposed” to operate dispassionately, with little institutional value placed on relationship-building, least of all with students. And students themselves may not always want a closer relationship with a teacher/mentor.) That said, if, however, the context I outline here were realized, then maybe, just maybe, the Meserets and Trans in our classrooms would have a chance.

13. Conclusion

To return to where I began, in the final scene of the movie of the book Girl, Interrupted, the Winona Ryder character Susanna is shown musing about the disaster she
has ever-so-narrowly averted. As she walks away from the hospital, she offers an assessment of her fellow-patients, still committed to the psychiatric ward. They are “you and me amplified,” she says.

I offer the same analysis of Meseret and Tran. It’s not as if they are qualitatively different from others—other students, or you and me. It is a matter of degree. Other immigrant students who wind up in intensive ESL programs may also struggle with writing, but not all suffer from the same literacy needs as Meseret and Tran. Yet the degree to which Tran and Meseret do struggle—and have not benefited from traditional composition instruction—sets them apart.

Whether, given the long interruption, Meseret’s and Tran’s limited literacy can develop to a level considered academically “acceptable” is an open question. I am not sure they themselves would be willing to set everything else aside and devote the time and energy I suspect it would take for them to make real headway. Nor, when I look around, do I see any handy institutional context in which that could happen. My fear is ultimately that they will not be lucky like Susanna, who, at the end of the movie, prepares to get on with her life as she expected it to be.

14. Epilogue

Since ending the study, several developments have occurred. Discouraged to the point of despair, Meseret left the university and put on hold her dream of pharmacy school. She got a job at K-Mart, took some science courses at a local community college to prepare for admission to their pharmacy tech program, and ultimately completed the program. She now works at Wal-Mart as a pharmacist’s assistant. In another show of resilience, she briefly returned to Ethiopia, after years away, to renew family ties. Despite all, she clings to the hope of one day becoming a real pharmacist.

As for Tran, after exiting ESL and then sitting out of English for a semester, he enrolled in the first course of the two-semester “regular” composition sequence, but withdrew when his courage failed. The following term, he enrolled again, this time squeaking through with a C. He then let two semesters go by before daring to enroll in the second-semester course, taking only engineering courses in the meantime. In his sixth year of undergraduate study and long-since a senior, Tran enrolled in the dreaded freshman course, dropped it, and this current semester enrolled again—and dropped it again.

The end of the tale cannot yet be told.

References
