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# Travelers All: Teaching English in a Multicultural World

BY GILIAN GORLE

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**T**he *journey*—the *quest*—is a potent metaphor whose different levels of meaning suggest tantalizing possibilities. It is a metaphor that I find especially evocative as an English teacher in a multicultural college.

Perhaps the most satisfying of all journeys are those that bring us full circle—but never to quite the same place, for the insights gained along the way have changed us and the way we see the world. In the words of T. S. Eliot,

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>1</sup>*

Journeys need not be physical, of course: the possibilities of discovery and growth are endless, whether or not we travel geographically. And the beauty of English teaching is the opportunity to place these possibilities at the center of the curriculum.

The fact that classrooms around the world are becoming more culturally diverse brings discovery all the closer. Rather than diversity being a dilemma or a source of divisiveness, a multicultural class can be a wonderful teaching resource.

As I write this article, I'm preparing for my final semester of teaching at Pacific Adventist College in Papua New

Guinea. Looking back on almost five years here, I realize how privileged I've been to work in such a varied linguistic and cultural context. The college draws its students and staff from more than a dozen countries. Many of these countries are themselves quite diverse: for example, Papua New Guinea has some 700 languages and many different cultural groups.

For an English teacher, this is fascinating and challenging. It means that classes almost invariably include students from several different countries. And classmates from the same country probably come from different cultures and language

groups. An even greater challenge is the fact that almost all of the students are speakers of other languages (probably three or four) in addition to English.

Both faculty and students have left home to come here. So we are travelers together.

Celebrating diversity is central to my philosophy of teaching. As I understand the gospel, we are each called to be light and salt in our community—whether or not we happen to be living at home. I believe that our rendition of the Good News will be illuminated—or flavored—by our unique cultural and linguistic “codes.” This has profound implications for teachers. If we

choose, our classrooms can be places where variety is valued—places where we write new translations of God’s love.

English teaching can be especially conducive to this type of journey. As students approach their work—whether discussing literature, debating media issues, or beginning a creative writing project—they bring their own particular perspectives and questions. As they learn to listen to one another and seek to understand different views, they find their own thinking is challenged. Teachers who are receptive to new perspectives, who regard their own work as a journey of discovery, will seek to foster a safe atmosphere in which everyone can grow. Such an atmosphere is characterized by openness, acceptance, mutual trust, and an understanding of diversity as healthy and potentially energizing.

Beyond the basic foundation—which, in my case, features wide reading, critical thinking, group work, and “process” writing—an English program can be greatly enriched by multicultural classes. This can happen in many ways. This article examines three of my favorites, and offers some suggestions for defusing potential

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*One of the author’s English students talks to the class at Pacific Adventist College.*

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conflicts that may arise.

### **English Language Varieties**

While linguists continue to debate the exact meaning of “standard” English, language teachers and students understand its importance. Yet English, like all living languages, is dynamic. Students from a multilingual background may have a natural advantage here because of the nuances of meaning and expression that other lan-

guages provide. (For this reason, it is often helpful to consult several translations of the Bible when studying a passage or theme.)

Whether or not they have a strong foundation in linguistics, teachers can raise their students’ awareness of different varieties of English. This may begin with assigning students to collect samples of speech in order to gain insights into local language use. As the range of samples grows, it may produce patterns that can be studied and tested. This body of material can provide a practical base for mini-lessons on certain aspects of grammar (perhaps the past tense, or subject-verb agreement.)

I’ve found this works best if students already understand the concept of language as *communication*, in which the *sender* addresses a particular *audience* and seeks an appropriate register. Thus, grammar books are treated as useful resources, but not the last word on currently acceptable usage. The many varieties of English are not seen as *right* or *wrong*, but rather as different possible registers, to be employed selectively—depending on the audience and the occasion. In this way, students develop their repertoire of English registers while also gaining a stronger understanding of grammar, syntax, and style. In the process, they learn to express themselves with flair.

### **Culture-Related Essay Topics**

This is one of my favorite ways of getting to know my students and their cultural traditions. During their first semester at college, my English students write an essay about a unique aspect of their culture. This is usually a major project that involves research and then the full sequence of “process” writing steps: planning, drafting, editing, revising, and pol-

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*Students studying in the library at Pacific Adventist College.*

ishing. The end results are often very sophisticated pieces of writing that are suitable for class publication.

Beyond the opportunity to learn about other cultures, I enjoy this exercise because of its positive effect on the students. It gives them a “platform” from which to tell the rest of us what makes their culture special. It affirms their identity as individuals. Knowing who we are and where we come from strengthens our confidence and chances for success. I believe it also deepens our understanding of God’s love by empowering us to find our place in the varied world He created. We are all made in His image, all gloriously different, all having something special to give.

Literary study is another fruitful area for cultural discussion and exploration. Studying metaphors and symbols with a multicultural class can be an enlightening experience, as each student supplies associations from his or her background. Thus, the precise connotations of *sunshine*, *shade*, and *rain* may differ for readers coming

from different climates. The word *shade* in a cool country would tend to have gloomy or dark connotations: for instance, a *shady* deal is downright dubious. Yet readers from a tropical climate may associate the word *shade* more positively, as a cool place to get shelter from the sun.

In the same way, colors can be culturally “coded.” Arun P. Mukherjee, an Indian academic working in Canada, explains:

*What may seem similar on the surface need not be substantively similar. For example, one of my most intense memories of childhood is seeing my mother changing into a white sari when visiting a house of mourning. White in India symbolizes bereavement and widows were condemned by custom to wear white clothing only. On the other hand, white in Euro-American symbolizes virginity and impending marriage. Thus, surface similarities may turn out to be quite deceptive since the semiotic codes of cultures are often not interchangeable.<sup>2</sup>*

In literature essays assigned to senior students, I often ask for a personal re-

sponse based on their own background. A drama such as *Voices From the Ridge*, by the Papua New Guinean writer Peter Kama Kerpi,<sup>3</sup> challenges readers to consider the clash between Christianity and traditional spiritual values. Students begin by examining the playwright’s treatment of character and theme, then draw from their own experience as they evaluate the strength of his achievement. Are his characters lifelike? Has he shown sufficient subtlety in his portrayal of the culture clash? Does he appear to take sides? Are his conclusions justified?

Questions like these are designed to elicit individual responses. I seek to draw out the more reticent students, for the more confident the class, the greater the diversity of viewpoints we are likely to find, and the richer our exchange of ideas.

Another interesting question to explore in this context is the philosophical distance between the playwright and each reader (student or lecturer). Again, this reveals different responses and invites thoughtful consideration of new perspectives.

### Media Response

Many people are overwhelmed by the media and their seemingly endless barrage: news, information, entertainment, talk shows, music, sports, advertising, current affairs. Unless we have a framework in which to evaluate what we see and hear, we run the risk of being manipulated. This is a matter of special concern to Christian teachers, for the power of the media is vast.

Media response features prominently in my teaching of English because I believe the classroom is an ideal place in which to learn about choice. Students need to develop their own selection criteria. But before they can do that, they need to understand how the various media operate.

The first fallacy to challenge is the notion that what appears in print, on radio or TV must be true. Close on its heels comes a second, related fallacy: the myth that information presented by the media comes to us with no “strings” attached. So my classes discuss market forces and the tensions they can impose on

editorial freedom. We study how journalistic policies and codes of ethics are influenced by the competitive, commercial world of supply and demand, profit and loss.

Excursions to media sources (such as the local TV or radio station) can provide a useful starting point. They can be followed up with small-group discussions of video recordings of TV programs and advertisements. Every

aspect of the communication process needs to be examined: audience, message, motive, impact, methodology, tricks, honesty, values. Newspaper clippings (generally supplied by the students) can be analyzed for style, content, meaning—both stated and implied—and total impact.

Because we all come from different backgrounds, our responses to the media will vary. So a group discussing a newspaper editorial and the letters it provoked may launch an enlightening journey through uncharted territory as different individuals express their views. Somewhere along the path, it becomes clear that a great deal of the meaning in the text is “buried” several layers under the surface, to be discovered only through careful excavation. Doing this with a multicultural group can be especially illuminating.

Many of us have grave reservations about the media, but teachers intent on fostering self-direction and independent thinking in their students will find much potential here. Information, like technology or any other resource, can be frighteningly powerful. Is it wiser to ignore it or to find intelligent, Christ-centered ways to respond?

### Conflict or Growth?

Although multicultural teaching offers many advantages, students may not always welcome new perspectives. In fact, some may actively resent them. Teachers who are worried about possible conflicts in class may wish to try some of the following suggestions.

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### *Class interaction helps build long-term friendships.*

1. Set clear ground rules for class discussions, using the Golden Rule as a guide. Communication games can be a great way to practice good conversational manners. For example, discuss a topic (chosen by popular vote) ensuring that each speaker begins by summarizing the previous speaker's viewpoint (to that person's satisfaction) before expressing his or her personal opinion. Alternatively, ask each new speaker to begin with a positive “stroke” such as “I agree with Maria that . . . , but I'd like to suggest . . . ,” or “Tom's networking idea intrigues me, and I wonder . . .” Both these games teach participants to listen actively to other viewpoints.

2. Set an example for the class by being receptive to new and surprising ideas. Show that you expect to be extended in class, and that you welcome new angles on familiar territory. Ask questions gently to draw students out, prompting them to explain unfamiliar concepts more clearly. Use “I” messages, along with reflective listening techniques. Freely acknowledge the contribution that other people (including students and children) have made to your own ideas.

3. Approach sensitive topics carefully, with a “crescendo” strategy in mind—starting small and gradually increasing the scope. As a prelude to a class discussion, give students a short writing assignment (which only you will read) in which they explain their views on the forthcoming topic and also anticipate points of difference. Spend time as a class exploring the

distinction between principles and specific applications in different contexts. Experiment with diagrams to illustrate the group's insights and conclusions.

4. If a student's opinion really does seem to conflict with biblical ethics, explore the underlying value system and see how it relates to Christianity. (Remember that Christian and Western are not necessarily synonymous.) Diagrams may be useful in “mapping out” common ground and points of divergence between

Christianity and other philosophies. Instead of labeling other systems of thought as “wrong” or “heathen,” try non-judgmental comments like “Tell us more about your culture's teaching on . . . ,” or “I believe in . . . as a Christian. Could you tell me how this would be regarded in your society?”

When a class discovers that a difference of opinion can be the start—not the end—of a conversation, it's ready for mature, instructive dialogue. Agreeing to differ is fine, but seeking to understand and appreciate is far more rewarding.

Teaching English in a multicultural context is seldom easy. But then, neither is traveling. Yet the journey—the chance to discover—keeps beckoning. I hope it never stops. ✍

*At the time this article was written, Gilian Gorle was an English Lecturer at Pacific Adventist College in Papua New Guinea. She has just begun work on a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Reading in England.*

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