

My Filipino Journey to Cosmopolitan English¹

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With a Theoretical Introduction by Shizhou Yang, Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Abstract

This article contains an autobiographical literacy journey from primary school to college, focusing on the author's affection for reading, her dislike of writing, and the development of other literacy skills. Early childhood reading and writing practices are often regarded as merely a bloom rather than a development of writing abilities, which developed later in my life. The development of the author's writing skills was attained at an international college course in Thailand, where teachers and peers provided feedback. According to Lee (2017a), getting feedback from peers and teachers can help improve one's writing abilities. This is in line with the claims made by scholars (Hairston, 1986; Lee, 2017b) who believe that teachers' and peers' feedback can play a vital role in student writing that "serves a primarily summative purpose, and its productive potential is under-utilized." (p. 60). The author noted that attending an international college not just helped improve her writing skills but also helped her develop her self-regard and intercultural understanding, which is referred to as "Cosmopolitan" (You, 2016). Being cosmopolitan involves expanding one's knowledge of other languages, cultures, and literacy. This essay tackles both personal and academic issues, revolving around the author's and the other scholars' experiences. The author has also used the opportunity to highlight the importance of feedback, citing various studies that show how important it is for writers to receive feedback. She hopes that her work will motivate and inspire others.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un recorrido autobiográfico por la alfabetización, desde la primaria hasta la universidad, centrándose en el gusto de la autora por la lectura, su aversión por la escritura y el desarrollo de otras habilidades de lectoescritura. Las prácticas de lectura y escritura en la primera infancia suelen considerarse un simple florecimiento, en lugar de un desarrollo de las habilidades de escritura, que se desarrollaron posteriormente en mi vida. El desarrollo de las habilidades de escritura de la autora se logró en un curso universitario internacional en Tailandia, donde profesores y compañeros le proporcionaron retroalimentación. Según Lee (2017a), recibir retroalimentación de compañeros y profesores puede ayudar a mejorar las habilidades de escritura. Esto coincide con las afirmaciones de académicos (Hairston, 1986; Lee, 2017b) que creen que la retroalimentación de profesores y compañeros puede desempeñar un papel vital en la escritura estudiantil, que "tiene un propósito principalmente sumativo, y su potencial productivo está infrutilizado" (p. 60). La autora señaló que asistir a una universidad internacional no solo la ayudó a mejorar sus habilidades de escritura, sino que también la ayudó a desarrollar su autoestima y comprensión intercultural, lo que se conoce como "Cosmopolita" (You, 2016). Ser cosmopolita implica ampliar el conocimiento de otros idiomas, culturas y la alfabetización. Este ensayo aborda cuestiones tanto personales como académicas, girando en torno a las experiencias de la autora y de otros académicos. La autora también ha aprovechado la oportunidad para destacar la importancia de la retroalimentación, citando diversos estudios que demuestran la importancia de recibirla para los escritores. Espera que su trabajo motive e inspire a otros.

Theoretical Introduction by Dr. Shizhou Yang, Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

In ELT research, it has been customary to study learners' experience and perspectives by using ethnographic approaches, drawing on interviews and other types of qualitative data. While important, such research is limited. For one thing, it continues to marginalize learners from the knowledge making process, positioning them only as anonymous data providers. This research practice sustains a colonizing relationship between the researcher and researched (Egido & De Costa, 2022). For another, ELT and its profound impact on learners' subjectivity entails an autobiographic dimension (Canagarajah, 2020; Kramsch, 2009; Nunan & Choi, 2010), which cannot be adequately captured by researchers other than the learners themselves. English learners experience, live, and interpret their experiences continuously both in language classrooms and outside to fashion their sense of self. They have important stories to tell, from their own perspectives, by adopting terms of their own choice to resolve the tensions between English and their non-English backgrounds. These stories, often traversing between monolingual and translanguaging ideologies (Belcher & Connor, 2001; Yang, 2023b; Yazan et al., 2021), provide timely corrections to existing knowledge of ELT, which often fails to see the world and learner identities truly from the learners' perspectives. These identities are multiple, dynamic, and unfinished (Norton, 2024, Yang, 2018). That's why in my senior seminar class in an EMI program in Thailand, I have guided my international students to draft and revise their literacy autobiographies based on autoethnographic research. I then encourage and support my students to publish their research-informed stories as journal articles or book chapters. As decolonization is gaining momentum in ELT (Canagarajah, 2023; Kubota,

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2022, 2025; Rabbi, 2023; Wei, 2022), I see my pedagogical move as concrete steps to pursue meaningful literacy education in English as a foreign language (Hanauer, 2012). I also view the publication of emergent translanguaging literature (Yang, 2023a) such as *My Filipino Journey to Cosmopolitan English* by Padayao as modest attempts to widen the “decolonial cracks” in ELT (Tyler, 2023; Walsh, 2018).

First Reading and Writing in English

I first encountered the practice of English literacy during my primary school days in the Philippines. I was five years old at that time, which is a little less than the average age of the students who had started in the first grade the previous school year. I was envious of my classmates, who were wearing uniforms and carrying pens, and notebook cases. During that time, I was an extra pupil, the youngest in the class, who the teacher had accepted to be part of the class. Since I was not a regular student, I could go out whenever I wanted. Fortunately, I passed and moved up the academic ladder.

The primary school gave me the opportunity to gain experience in English alongside my mother tongue, Tagalog. I began memorizing the alphabet from A to Z as I went along, and I also wrote my very long name every day on a piece of paper to practice. The various books that my teacher provided me helped me develop my reading abilities. Some of these included history books and short stories. One of my favorite stories was “Lazy Juan,” which was written in Tagalog, and another was “Adam and Eve” in English. The classroom was decorated with posters that were written in English. The songs that we sang every morning were also in English, as were the prayers that we recited before class started. Although I was able to experience English in various activities, I did not consider it a significant development in my writing skills. In fact, I only learned about writing in basic forms, such as the writing of my name and the use of the English alphabet. I believe that my writing came to life.

Lack of Writing in High School

Based on what I have experienced, I believe that attending high school was one of the best experiences of my life. It was an easy study environment, and I did not care if I passed or failed. I also avoided getting bored by going home whenever I felt like it. The main reason I enjoyed high school was because it was not about improving my writing skills. High school did not help me develop my writing skills as it did not teach me how to properly write.

However, there were various writing activities that were focused on the most exciting and fun experiences that one could have during the high school days. One of these was called “New Year’s Resolution.” In this activity, we were asked to write in English about the events that happened during the Christmas and New Year’s celebrations. I was very happy that I was able to write a couple of pages about the special occasions that I had with my family. Since I did not receive any feedback from the teacher about my writing, I did not know how I was doing. During my English class, there were over 40 students in my class, which made it hard for the teacher to provide individual feedback. The time that I would know if I had passed my English course or if I failed it was always at the close of the semester.

During my father’s visits to class meetings, he would often sign my card and he would show me my grades, which always surprised me. Even though my grades were so-so, my parents were very happy with my achievement. Since I had a mediocre writing grade, I decided to include this in my L2 writing course, to a bowl of chicken soup without the addition of any herbs or spices. A chicken soup without herbs or spices because I just didn’t like writing, it did not satisfy me especially because of lack of feedback given; therefore, without spices my writing was like a chicken soup without spices, just tasteless.

One of the fun activities that I enjoyed in English class was called “Peter Piper,” which was a tongue twister. This activity helped us improve our pronunciation. Since this activity was beneficial for me, I have not had any problems with my ability to read and speak in English.

A Sampaguita that Blooms in the Land of Smiles

Upon stepping onto Thailand soil in 2018, with my auntie, who supported and brought me to this country, I was immediately taken by its culture, food, and language. I thought that this country could be my second home, and it has provided me with an opportunity to experience something new. The country is full of surprises, and I decided to stay and continue my college education. I was happy to spend my time in this country up until my graduation in November, 2023.

As I travelled across Thailand, I began to compare myself to a stem of a Sampaguita that was planted in a different environment. The Sampaguita is a type of jasmine flower that grows both in the Philippines and Thailand. Although I was not sure this would happen, due to the country’s climate, the stem eventually grew into a beautiful Sampaguita. The same can be said for my learning English. Through studying English Communication and living for four years now in Thailand, I have been able to gain a

deeper understanding of different aspects of literacy and the language, and I started to adopt a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking towards English is referred to as the "Cosmopolitan English" or CE (You, 2016), which involves thinking about other people from different countries and the various ways those people use English. For instance, "some people have different pronunciation and vocabulary syntax, and/or discourse structures." (p. 10). You (2016) also added that the term CE is descriptive and heuristic. It aims to capture the various ways that individuals use English in their communities. It is also an attempt to educate people about the multiple characteristics and functions of English. In addition, it challenges us to think about how to promote cosmopolitan practice and awareness by being able to denounce certain negative ways of thinking about it.

In my experience for example, I noticed that English in Thailand differed from the language I was accustomed to in the Philippines. Filipinos tend to have a playful English accent, and they use a wide variety of vocabulary. Due to the unique accent of Thais, I was not able to easily communicate with them, but through the simple use of vocabulary, I was still able to understand them. Slowly, I was able to get used to the simple way Thai people spoke. This has allowed me to communicate with my friends and relatives in Thailand. I have even noticed that I also have a Thai accent when speaking. The funniest part about this is that whenever I speak English or Thai, people always assume that I am a Thai.

Not only have my cultural knowledge and language improved, my life has gotten better and I have become more aware of how literacy works in society. I had initially thought that literacy was about being able to "read or write", but it is actually more than that. Literacy is not just being able to communicate with others; it is not just about expressing ideas. It is also about understanding the implicit and explicit meanings of every word or deed uttered. In other words, literacy encompasses all forms of communication, including writing, speaking, and reading. For instance, if you are driving a car, or any other type of vehicle, you might come across a traffic light, which is referred to as a literacy sign. It is a symbol that says to stop and allows the traffic to flow smoothly and prevent accidents. We use these signs as a language to express our intentions and act according to them.

Overall, being able to cope with the accent differences and learn more about literacy has allowed me to make sense of things in my life. This was a major lesson that I had not previously learned, as my native mind was already in a safety box, I was narrow-minded.

Writing Struggles in College

When I first arrived at Payap International College, I thought that I could easily write in English and would be able to get through the program. However, I made a huge mistake because English is very complex. One of the first things that the teacher told me was that I would do well in the Language Enhancement Center (LEC) test as a requirement to enter the college. I believe that this was because I could communicate with her easily. I then took the test with a timer, which was very uncomfortable for me as I was not used to working with timers. During the test, I realized that English was not as easy as I had thought. The test was very challenging for me as it included various questions that I had never encountered before. After the test was over, the teacher called me and told me that I had failed. This was the moment that I realized maybe English wasn't the language for me. It is actually very complex and can be very challenging to learn.

The college days are the time when my literacy development would most likely take place. Before this, I had no idea how to form words into sentences or phrases. Alvarez et al. (2020) noted that in order to be successful in writing, one must have a voice. Unfortunately, I had no voice in my papers, which made them very confusing and they lacked information.

During my first year, I had a hard time writing. Not only did I have no idea how to organize my thoughts into a coherent piece of writing, but I also had a hard time finding the right ideas to put into my paper. One of the biggest issues that I had was finding the right information to connect with the ideas that I had in my head.

When I first started writing, I thought that it was only necessary to have a source for the information I needed. However, I realized that we could also use the ideas in our heads to connect with the information that we came across in our studies. This was a very challenging task as it required me to combine my creativity and critical thinking skills with the information that I had collected.

I initially thought that all the sources that I needed could only come from my own experiences and memories, as this course mainly focused on autobiography. However, after some time, I began to feel satisfied and thought that my literacy autobiography could also be academic. During the beginning of the class on literacy, a question was asked regarding the possibility of writing our own literacy stories. After some time, I was finally able to answer this question, which is yes, we can do it. Anything can be achieved if we persevere and connect with the scholars that we are learning from.

Types of Writing I Enjoyed the Most

Through the English Communication department, I was able to take advantage of various writing practices, such as research and academic papers. These types of writing made me realize how difficult it can be to start from nothing. Although it can be challenging to start from scratch, I am glad to have discovered my writing skills after taking advantage of the lessons that I learned and the feedback that I received from my mentor. One of the most enjoyable types of writing for me was journal and poem writing.

Each week, my classmates and I created a journal to discuss the in-class discussion and our thoughts on the reading materials. Aside from being able to reflect on what we had learned, writing a journal also allowed me to think about what I had to say about the topic. One of the main reasons I like writing a journal is that it allows me to freely think about what I have to say. Lee (2008) cited Fuhler and Faris (1996, p. 118), who said that journals are “a birthplace of creative and critical thinking” (p. 26). In addition to that, Lee believes that journal writing is a form of creative expression that has been used to reflect classroom activities. Journals can also be used by teachers to reflect on the learning that their students have gained from the class discussion or the assigned reading materials.

In addition to writing journal entries, the teacher encouraged us to write poems in which our feelings about the writing process can be expressed. For instance, I wrote a poem about my experience with literacy, which was entitled “I found a friend within a pen.” Poems have always been one of my favorite forms of writing as they allow me to express my thoughts on anything that makes me happy or unhappy. In addition, poetry writing lets me connect with others and engage myself in creative expression. I believe that if you enjoy writing, it will make your task easier and allow you to get more done. Apart from being able to keep track of our journal and poems entries, the teacher also provided feedback to help us improve our writing skills. This ensured that the students were engaged with their teacher throughout the process.

Meaning and Importance of Feedback

Feedback is claimed to be a “conceptualized as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspect of one’s performance or understanding” (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Winnie and Butler (as cited by Hattie & Timperley, 2007) also provided a clearer meaning of feedback as “feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tone or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, met-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and task or recognitions tactics or strategies” (p. 82).

Feedback has always been a powerful tool for a beginning writer like me as it allows me to improve my writing skills. It has also been a delightful gift that I can receive from my peers and teachers whenever I write something. Hairston (1986) and Lee (2017b) noted that providing feedback to students can be a challenging task as some students may not pay attention to the feedback that they receive. However, it is also a vital part of their writing assignments as it helps them improve their skills. As such, feedback is beneficial as it enhances students’ understanding of the material being taught in class, and it allows a writer to make better decisions in any writing activity. Without it, my writing for example, would have continued to be poor, and I would not have been able to achieve my goals because I would not be able to properly communicate my ideas. Having a mentor who can guide me through the process has also helped me improve my skills.

Types of Feedback in College

In online and classroom learning, teachers and students can provide their own personal feedback. There are various types of feedback that is shared, such as diagnosis feedback, formal or informal feedback, and peer or empowering feedback, which is also given in my writing courses.

Diagnosis feedback is the first type of feedback that is delivered to students and usually focused on the students’ weaknesses and strengths (Lee, 2017a). I got this type of feedback in Dr. T’s class, every time I had to write academic papers and essays. After submitting my papers, the teacher gave me clear feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of my work in order to identify areas of my writing that needed attention. For instance, he often gave me feedback on my recent work for not having enough ideas or details in my paper, and my sentences were not clear enough. This type of feedback did not bother me, but makes me smile because it was accurate. It is true that I am not good at organizing my work, I do not find it a problem because feedback can help improve my skills.

Moreover, Dr. T used *encouraging feedback* on areas of my work that I do well and suggestions on where I could make improvements, which often gives a positive mindset towards my writing. Positive feedback helped me become motivated to improve myself as a learner. Lee (2017a) noted that teachers should use feedback as a tool for their students’ learning and that teacher “should not ignore the students’

efforts and willingness to take ownership of their learning". Thus, receiving encouraging feedback is very important for writers as it praises the abilities of the students and highlights the worth of their work.

Another teacher, Dr. Y, often used *encouraging feedback* to praise the creativity of his students. In this feedback, teacher often referred to the work as "well done," "bravo," "very good," and "interesting." Each evaluation was sincere as the teacher was acknowledging the students' hard work and dedication. Dr. Y also provided formal and informal feedback to his students outside of class. The formal feedback consisted of performance reviews, assessments of our writing production, while the latter is more informal and involves regular interactions with the students. The informal feedback on the students' academic journals and drafts during the in-class discussions and submission of their work was also valuable.

Since, Dr. Y was not always giving diagnostic feedback, he often gave additional suggestions and questions in order to have a clearer understanding of students' work. This type of feedback can help improve the communication between teachers and students. According to Lee (2017a), feedback should be made comprehensible to the students. Lee added that suggestion feedback can also help students develop their writing skills by allowing them to think of more possibilities. In addition to that, Lee offers to help teachers and writing instructors implement assessment to improve student learning.

Another type of helpful feedback is *peer review* or *empowerment feedback*, which my classmates provided me either online or in class. According to Adams et al. (2011), the difference between teacher and peer feedback is that the latter focuses more on the details of the feedback, such as on grammatical issues, spelling or syntax issues. Also, on the part where students do well on their writing, teachers do encourage student by giving positive feedback such as, "well done, you did a great job or the opposite way, such as, "your grammar use is weak" , "I don't understand what you mean here, this need a clarification".

Tooth also added that learner-to-learner interactions promote individual growth. Unlike the teacher, who often focuses on a single linguistic issue, peer feedback provides students with more constructive feedback. Although peers are usually shy when it comes to addressing a classmate's writing weaknesses, their feedback has been helpful. For me, peer feedback is usually very motivating and helps me keep going with my writing. It increases my confidence and helps me improve my skills.

One of my most important writing mentors was a student who helped me improve my skills during my first year. She was assigned to critique and evaluate my work, which included an essay I wrote about a holiday I took to Thailand for the first time. In the same year, she helped me polish my paper and make sure that my spelling and grammar were correct. She was the reason I was able to get a perfect score on my writing project.

In conclusion, coming to Thailand and developing myself into a beautiful flower has been such a wonderful education for me. While at Payap International College, I was exposed to various aspects of literacy, and one of the most important factors that I learned was to use feedback to improve my writing skills. All of the feedback that I received is regarded as friends and will help me continue to improve my writing skills. Our writing should also be complimented through feedback to make it look and sounds better. Thus, one of the most crucial lessons that I cherish during my time in Thailand was how to adapt the concept of cosmopolitanism to better understand different country's language, culture, and people.

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