

# The Malleability of Language: Context and Creativity in the Classroom



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# A Little about Me



- BAH in English (creative writing), CELTA certified
- Have worked in ELT for over ten years, both as a teacher and as an administrator, advisor, and manager
- Experienced in writing and editing; have taken many courses in editing, including structural, stylistic, and copy editing
- TESL NS Editor starting in 2015
- Personal interest in clear communication and sociolinguistics

# A Question



- Look at the sentences below. If one of your learners wrote these sentences, what would you correct?

*I am about to timidly slip out of this party, hopefully unnoticed. And the car which is sitting in the driveway is my getaway car. Hopefully, no one will hear my engine. At parties I always feel uncomfortable, so at weekends I prefer to be alone.*

# An Answer (Perhaps)



- None of the supposed “mistakes” in those sentences are really mistakes! (The writing isn’t great, but it isn’t incorrect, either.)
- Vestigial rules of days gone by (thank you, Strunk and White)
- Stylistic preferences
- What to conclude? **Language changes constantly, and it is a very flexible tool.**

# Agenda



- Rationale behind malleable language as a learning tool
- A few practical activity ideas
- Notes on evaluating learners
- Conclusions

# Rationale—Language as a Tool



- Rich variety of Englishes = Infinite number of contextual factors
- Understanding context is everything: It affects style, grammar and syntax, register, dialects, regionalisms, and diglossia, just to name a few
- It's not scary; it's fascinating! Why not use it as a tool?
- Learning rules and correct language is important, but equally important is knowing that these rules change constantly and keeping abreast of changes

# Examples of the Importance of Context



- Comma style in academic writing (e.g., APA or Chicago) vs. writing for print media (e.g., Canadian Press Style)—more is less, less is more
- Arabic chat alphabet—a brief history
- Singlish vs. “standard” English in Singapore
- Canadian vs. American vs. British spelling

# Activity #1—Using Code-Switching



- What is code-switching?
  - “The practice of alternating spontaneously between two or more languages, dialects, or accents.” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2004)
- Aim: To use a very common practice to get learners to reflect on how they use English as a tool to communicate, even when using their own languages.



# Code Switching



- Activity idea: Learners record short conversations in their language(s).
- Listen to and transcribe (if possible) the conversations.
- Look for English words, structures, translations, influence, and so on.
- Present their findings to the class and discuss the implications.
- Alternative: Learners can also use a text conversation such as a IM exchange in their own language. Next, they complete the same analysis and presentation/discussion as in the above version of the activity.
- Adapt analysis based on language level

# Code Switching—Advantages



- Using corpora in the classroom
- Using language that relates to the students' real lives
- Encouraging overall language awareness
- Understanding the role of context in language use
- Cultivating a learner-centered approach

# Code Switching—Notes



- Encourage your learners to experiment and explore code switching between English and their other languages, both inside and outside the classroom.
- Don't ban controlled exploration of other languages along with English; this is counterproductive to building awareness of and interest in English.
- Empower them to understand how languages blend—foster creativity and playfulness.

# Code Switching—Example



- See handout for details

# Activity #2—Using Style



- What is style?
  - Style is a “manner of writing or speaking or performing” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2004). It is a series of choices made by writers or speakers about how they want the language to look, sound, and feel.
- **Aim:** To make students aware of how many of the “rules” they have learned about language use are actually stylistic preferences that they can learn to manipulate to their advantage.

# Stylistic Choices—Examples



- Series (Oxford) comma
- Capitalization choices (up style and down style)
- Quotation style (regional differences)
- *Which* in nonrestrictive clauses
- Hyphenation of compounds
- Number style (spell out or use numerals?)
- Ad infinitum!

# Style—Activity #1



- Choose two samples of text carefully from different contexts (e.g., a paragraph from a journal article and one from a newspaper article) that illustrate one focused stylistic choice (e.g., the use of commas after introductory phrases).
- Learners
  - identify all uses of the language point,
  - highlight the differences between the two texts, and
  - discuss why these differences might exist.

## Style—Activity #2



- Learners learn the principles behind a language point
- Look at examples of real language use or even “errors” from signs, menus, etc.
- Use those examples or “errors” to learn more about how language is used, but how it can be used to communicate clearly
- Students can either “correct” the errors or try replicating them—this gives them practice in understanding context



# Example—Style Activity #2



# Style Activities—Advantages



- Learning to adapt language use to different situations
- Understanding the importance of grammar and syntax as tools for clear communication rather than binding rules
- Being able to understand language concepts and use more deeply
- Being able to essentially code switch between different registers and contexts
- Following detailed directions

# Style—Notes



- Create a house style guide for your institution, or choose a style to follow (e.g., APA or Chicago).
- Know the style guide and teach your preferences to your learners right from the beginning, but make it very clear that these are choices your institution has made. Make the reasons for your choices clear to staff and learners alike. Get everyone on board by explaining that your institution's communication will be clearer and more consistent.

# Style—Notes, continued



- Know about stylistic preferences yourself—follow current changes and shifts in acceptable and common language use, grammar, syntax, etc.—pass this info on to your learners and colleagues.
- Encourage learners to experiment—style is like a code to access or convey meaning clearly.

# Evaluating Students



- Reward creativity and clarity at all times
- Don't correct every mistake—focus on the ones that impede clear communication
- Point out diversions from your institution's house style, but don't correct them, and don't take off marks for diversions
- Get learners to reflect on L1 influence on their writing or speaking, and help them build awareness of the influence their L1 has on their English communication

# Conclusion



- Don't underestimate learners' capacity to absorb the effects of context—get them to reflect on it as early as possible in their learning so they see it as a tool instead of an insurmountable obstacle.
- Bring passion and curiosity to the table yourself; these qualities are contagious.

# Questions or Comments?



- Type 'em in the chat box!
- Thank you so much for listening.

