Formal English Without Tears:
Rewriting the Narrative of Developmental Students

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Dedicated to Professor Jack Whitehead, Dr Annie Gray and Pamela Smith, without whom this paper and this educator, at least in this 'incarnation', would not exist. With love and gratitude for their generosity, instruction and wisdom.

Abstract

Forward

When I began this inquiry in 2009, and indeed until very recently, I had difficulty framing it within the context of subjective experience or personal knowledge. New both to teaching and to the practice of Action Research, I was focused on the outcomes to be recorded or explained – which is the focus that academic training instills. I remained, despite my intense efforts to internalize the rationale behind Action Research, unable to see the central role of the *process*, the personal journey that had generated those outcomes. I am the product of an educational system, much like the one that fashioned my students, in which objects and measurable outcomes are all-important. I could not have articulated that position, any more than a fish can describe the water in which it swims; but I operated out of it, was constrained and directed by it, without being aware of it.

With exposure to Action Research, came my own recognition that the objectivist, academic standpoint, so long, so exclusively and so universally applied, has produced absurdities. One such absurdity is the idea that intellectual rigor renders personal journeys and insights irrelevant, even improper for inclusion in any 'sound' inquiry. The latter must remain entirely independent of the 'I' of whoever is conducting it, even in the realm of human relationship and human development. There is, of course, no such thing as 'pure' objectivism – the ideal that still informs most of the world of academic research. Indeed, the quest for pure objectivity belongs firmly to the nineteenth century. Twentieth century science long ago placed the observer and the observed within a single, indivisible continuum. And twenty first century science continues to apply this stricture to the most rigorous and impersonal of the sciences. Modern academia in general, however, has yet to catch up with, to encompass – even to acknowledge this revolutionary paradigm within its own methodology.

In the 20th century, physics was forced into the position of re-evaluating the role of the observer, both in relativity and in quantum mechanics. In relativity, the absolutes of Newtonian physics were banished, and observations obtained by observers in different frames of reference became all that was available. These observations were linked through a system of coordinate transformations.

> In quantum mechanics, the observer and the system being observed became mysteriously linked so that the results of any observation seemed to be determined in part by actual choices made by the observer. This situation is represented by the wave function, a function in the complex domain that contains information about both the cosmos at large and the observer's apparent state of knowledge, (Kolecki).

I became an opponent of universal, academic 'objectivism' in stages. Intellectually, I now view it as operating from a false premise, and indeed with a degree of dishonesty. The premise is that within any field of human inquiry, but particularly the humanities, the social sciences or the arts, (and education, as I see it, falls within all three fields), there are 'purely objective truths' that can be usefully severed from the subjective humanity of their discoverers. The dishonesty lies in the verbal gymnastics, the contrivances, by which the impossibility of eliminating subjectivity is disguised.

> ...We may infer that the confidence placed in physical theory owes much to its possessing the same kind of excellence from which pure geometry and pure mathematics in general derive their interest, and for the sake of which, they are cultivated.
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> We cannot truly account for our acceptance of such theories without endorsing our acknowledgment of a beauty that exhilarates and a profundity that entrances us. Yet the prevailing conception of science, based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, seeks – and must seek at all costs – to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play...
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> The term simplicity...is used for smuggling an essential quality into our appreciation of scientific theory, which a mistaken conception of objectivity forbids us openly to acknowledge...I shall call this practice a pseudo-substitution. It is used for playing down man's real and indispensable intellectual powers for the sake of maintaining an, 'objectivist' framework which in fact cannot account for them, (Polanyi 15,16).

Ethically and morally, also, I oppose this 'cult of objectivity', as inimical to authentic human learning, understanding and development and damaging in its dehumanization of those engaged in the learning process. For example, that there can be any such a thing as an educational process in which human relationship is less than the ground and source of all learning is patently absurd. Yet we have crafted an educational edifice in which human relationship is considered a mere by-product of the

process of transferring information from one supposedly independent and unrelated source, (teacher), to another, (student). In this construct of what education is and is for and how it 'does it' we see the fruit of what Polanyi describes as,

> ...the crippling mutilations which centuries of objectivist thought have imposed on the minds of men, (381).

Even having reached this position, however, I continued to focus on outcomes and objective analysis because I did not know how to see the world in any other way. In other words, I could recognize and define that which I could not break free of. It is only now, after two years of research and inquiry, and after participating in one real time and two online Action Research seminars that the metaphorical 'light bulb' has finally switched on.

Only now, do I recognize results and outcomes emerging from my classrooms as the offspring of mode of being, of my love for, and connection to my students and of my own 'tacit knowledge'.

> ...a vast reservoir of personal knowledge underlies our personal-social practices. We know more than we can say; our personal knowledge is unarticulatable because usually, we are not aware of it – we just know. ...Tacit knowledge is that vast fund of practical, local and traditional knowledge that is embodies in dispositions and forms of life and expressed in flair and intuition and or which our theoretical or articulated knowledge is only the visible tip (Gray 1993:70) On this view, knowledge is in the way we live our lives and is, essentially, embodied knowledge (McNiff, Whitehead 41).

Ironically, I require my own students to take on what is, invariably, a great struggle each semester. This is the struggle to shift their own entrenched, grade-school instilled assumptions, so as to view the process by which they arrive at whatever they have to say and however they wish to say it, as being of greater moment and relevance than the submission of a 'product' containing the requisite number of words. The irony lies in the fact that I am generally successful in assisting my students to make this perceptual shift. Yet it has taken me far longer to shift my own entrenched, academically instilled assumptions, so compelling and so relentless is the tyranny of our mythical objectivism.

What is finally clear to me is that objective, verifiable propositions, mechanisms and methodologies articulated and described in this paper, *do* explain the success of a strategy that assists underprepared students to acquire, and to express themselves in Formal English. But these valid objects hang from the underlying structure of a much more fundamental framework: the framework of an individual's living educational theory and tacit knowledge, which defines their context and their transformative potential.

> I am arguing that the propositional form is masking the living form and content of an educational theory which can generate valid descriptions and explanations for the educational development of individuals. This is not to deny the importance of propositional forms of understanding. I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education, (Whitehead, Creating 2).

Any and all discovery can occur only within a context that allows of its possibility in the first place; we do not find what we do not seek. (Thus Columbus, for example, who sought a passage to India found what he expected and bequeathed the name 'Indians' to generations of the peoples of the Americas.) The assumptions we bring to our classrooms, the cultural or social narratives we unconsciously impose or reinforce, are the context that determines what we do and do not seek in and of our students. And it is these assumptions and narratives, *not* the educational theories we espouse, that ultimately define the limits of possibility.

This is true context. Without it, the cycle of distinction, articulation and reflection that fuels discovery as a continuous and evolutionary process, is stillborn. And any educational theory whose true context has been erased by academic objectivism, stands in danger of becoming a new kind of tyranny, a formula imposed on educators and students alike only to be succeeded by the next in a procession of fashionable 'fixes' whose failures and successes can neither instruct nor inform. And so this paper includes the context, my context, as well as the objective 'facts' about my own redrafting of the narrative about developmental students.

Introduction: Background to the Development of the Strategy

I work as an adjunct writing instructor within the Transitional Studies Department, (which elsewhere might be called the Developmental, or Remedial Studies Department), at Pellissippi State Community College in East Tennessee. This is a new department within the college; its primary role is to help students to develop the necessary skills for first year college courses. From Fall of 2011, it must do this within a fifteen week, four- credit-hour course, (at the longest), for each student. Funding does not exist for a longer or more intensive course. Nor is having students repeat the same course until mastery is achieved an option that the TSD can afford to embrace; each time a student fails to complete a pre-college course, he or she become significantly less likely to graduate college at all.* (Table) Consistent with national statistics, of the 2,000 or so freshman who enter the college each year, more than half will begin their college careers in this department.

> ...fewer than half of the students who enter college directly from high school complete even a minimally defined college preparatory program. Once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses. Those students requiring the most remedial work are the least likely to persist and graduate (Tritelli).

In the face of rapidly increasing student enrolment, increased state demands for higher performance outcomes coupled with decreased state budgets and time allowances, the department has to square the same circle that community colleges across the nation now face, by developing successful programs despite seemingly impossible constraints. The pressures are, thus, considerable. Numerous leading edge and 'best practice' strategies have been piloted and adopted within the TSD, with the aim of increasing student engagement and confidence, strategies that emphasize student engagement and subject relevance and raise process above outcome.

Educational Context

There are many tensions and contradictions in a 'gateway' college such as ours, which exists to provide access to higher learning for the whole community and must,

therefore, serve sections of the community whose interests, and perceptions of those interests, are often in conflict.

The majority of students have a practical purpose in view, one that entails a job, (or a better job), a higher wage or better career prospects. It is often the case that students themselves have no great respect or desire for either the qualification or the course of study that leads to it. (A few, in fact, will spend the duration of their college career trying to find ways of avoiding or shortcutting their way through their courses in order to acquire the all important 'piece of paper' with as little pretense at interest in what they consider irrelevant and even absurd instruction, as they can possibly manage.) They are pragmatically aware, however, that their potential employers place great store on both. Indeed, so competitive is the job market that students complain that even haulage firms are beginning to require an Associates degree and even where one is not required, preference is certainly given to those who have the academic qualifications. Thus, they can be seen, shoulders to the grindstone, doggedly persistent in the task of 'getting educated'.

The academic, artistic and intellectually inclined section of the community, of which we can fairly count most of the college faculty, sees the interests of these students somewhat differently. The shortsightedness of this 'piece of paper' mentality is a source of frustration for many educators who still feel a desire to instill in their students a love of the subject for its own sake, (in my case written English), and a mindset that would make of these students 'lifelong learners'. The students, it may be argued, do not know enough to know what is good for them. After all, the skill of learning itself, of being able to learn anything one chooses to learn, no matter in what field or discipline, is one that will serve them better than anything else they can take from higher education into a world that is changing so fast, that most will graduate to find jobs that did not exist when they matriculated – or to find that the jobs for which they have become qualified, have ceased to exist in the same period.

Then there are the joys of academic and intellectual exploration for their own sakes – the adventures of literature, music, philosophy, mathematical principals, evolution, astronomy and so on. These are joys many students do not yet know and

cannot value, having never known them. It is the better part of human nature that whatever has inspired us, we wish to share with others and so educators, quite naturally, wish to share these wonders with our students. But the thrill of igniting curiosity and imagination, the romance of instilling the desire to learn must wither quickly in the harsh, pragmatic light of the, 'Yeah-but-will-it-get-me-a-good-grade-if-I-write-about-it?' perspective.

This, then, is the character of the ubiquitous dissonance between the expectations and agendas of students and those of departmental faculty. This is the elephant in the classroom around which we must work.

Personal Context

My initial interest, when I began teaching developmental writing in 2009, was in discovering whatever fundamental issues had pre-determined my students' generally unhappy dispositions towards my own subject, (writing), and their self-expectation as regards the course of study. (The scale of that unhappiness generally falls somewhere in the range between merely uneasy and outright antagonistic.)

I also wanted to become more conscious of any prevailing, institutional narratives about, and expectations of these students – in other words, of our stories about them. I suspected that institutionally we might, to some degree, be teaching to those stories rather than within the context of the experiences, realities, and the true potentials, of the students. There is always a danger, in any large community, of unconsciously adopting the prevailing narrative. This means that as members of that community, we often unconsciously co-create or perpetuate a mythology, one that can never reveal the truth of the human beings we encounter and that we do not question because we 'already know'. It means that we encounter our own stories and not real people, that we have predetermined expectations rather than being open to extraordinary potential.

I made an early, though unconscious, decision. Rather than applying myself to remedy students' negative attitudes towards my subject, I would explore and try to understand the history and scope, (context), of their existing relationship with the

language of written English - perhaps the context of their entire educational experience - so as to address those issues directly.

Here, there is a slight but profound distinction. The 'remedying' approach assumes a deficiency in the student – a 'bad' attitude, for example, that requires to be changed to a 'good' attitude. This is the conventional perception, and liable to be reinforced by the fact that, in rejecting the value of the subject, a student may appear to invalidate the professional identity of the educator. Thus the attitude of the student, whether it is one of enthusiasm or, more commonly in developmental classes, one of seemingly intransigent disinterest, is received as deeply personal. Because of perceived invalidation, a students' disinterest in or dislike of a subject may be mirrored by the instructor either as a personal dislike of the student or as that combative response instinctive to human beings who are challenged - the desire to prove the challenger wrong, to 'win'.

In deciding to explore rather than remedy, I unconsciously avoided the problem of personal challenge but I cannot say with any truth that I knew what I was doing at the time. I certainly *felt* both of those reactions towards students, individually and collectively, but I had already made a different choice, one that required me to be aware of and transcend those instinctive responses and so I adopted a practice of 'stepping outside' of those feelings. Specifically:

i. By allowing the possibility of a historical problem beyond the will and inclination of the student, a powerful formative experience for instance, I allowed the possibility that disinterest and even hostility on the part of a student may not be 'wrong' or even require remedy. It might, instead, require recognition and validation. I admitted the possibility, in fact, that disengagement, dislike and hostility might be valid and appropriate responses in the context of that history;

ii. I required a change to take place in myself before expecting change in my students. I demanded of myself a growth in knowledge and understanding of the personal context that each student brought to the classroom and a willingness to accept and validate even that which appeared to invalidate my 'professional identity'. (It helped that this professional identity was quite new to me.)

In summary, I chose to explore the formative educational experiences and the resultant perceptions and expectations of my students, (their contextual and historical relationship with education in general and my subject in particular), with the aim of creating a classroom environment that would be directly responsive to those experiences, perceptions and expectations. With hindsight, this choice has proved to be the sine qua non of the approach I was to take with my students and of the language immersion strategy I was to develop.

My story

In my first semester of college teaching, I found myself on an East Knoxville campus, facing a classroom of twenty-four disaffected, disengaged and, in some cases, actively hostile, young adults. Almost all of them came from 'blue collar' families. My own family is professional and middle class, through and through. About one third of these students were African American. I am European. Most were the first members of their families ever to enter college. Most of my family has attended college or university. And the worlds my students trailed with them into the classroom were alien, painful and even shocking.

One student could not sleep because of the sound ofgunfights in her neighborhood. Even when it was quiet, she lay awake listening and afraid. Another, who was a joy to have in the class and a very promising student, was picked up by police and sent back to the prison he had sworn he would never return to. His friends insisted he was innocent and I believed them. One young woman kept coming to class with bruises because her boyfriend regularly beat her up; this was his way of dissuading her from attending college. (Apparently he disapproved of her ambition to obtain a degree.) Yet another was made homeless at about the mid semester mark, along with her husband and son. For two weeks, she and her husband lived in their car. (She kept coming to classes, although getting her assignments done proved rather trickier.) All of my female students, that semester, were single parents and most of the male students had at least one child by a former girlfriend.

Standing at the front of the classroom, white, middle class, middle aged and, from my students point of view, profoundly out of touch with their reality, I could not have been much more alien if I had come from another planet. They knew it and I knew it... and they showed how they felt about it.

Other instructors I spoke to described the behaviors typical in these classrooms as: childish, undisciplined, lazy and disengaged. I perceived them as hostile and often passive aggressive. Phone texting and messaging on 'Facebook' during class, shrugging or joking when asked a question, sauntering into class late with as much noise and aplomb as could be managed – and many other behaviors supposed to be part of the profile for these students, were things I experienced as their way of hitting back at something deeply resented but with the power to alter the course of their lives for good or ill. They simply could not afford the luxury of displaying overt hostility.

This was not just uncomfortable; it was overwhelming. At this point, whatever theory of language I had read and absorbed, whatever social and personal values had fed into my understanding of and approach to my role as an educator, all of it – all of me – was being confronted by a sickening dissonance in my own classroom, the gap between the person and the educator I wished to be and to be perceived as, and the perception, the reflection in their eyes that my students were actually giving back to me. Whatever I felt, however, and in whatever way I might have wished to react, I had made a commitment and thus set myself on a predetermined course: 'Rather than applying myself to remedy students' negative attitudes towards my subject, I would explore and try to understand the history and scope, (context), of their existing relationship with the language of written English – perhaps the context of their entire educational experience – so as to address those issues directly.'

I began by seeing, as far as I was able, how things might look from my students' point of view. And I saw their decade-long, (or longer), struggle with an alien and 'superior' form of language to their own, natural language and what that might mean to them. I saw the clearly implied, and on occasion, perhaps, explicitly stated inferiority of their own language environments.

Ten months later, I would hear Jack Whitehead speak at the Action Research Conference in San Diego in 2010; he gave a precise and appropriate definition of what these students had undergone in their educational experience. He called it, "educational colonization". This is what I knew but could not articulate, as I recognized the truth in the way that my students saw me and what I represented. But months before I knew that it *was* colonization, I went to work to discover exactly what form that colonization had taken. And three or four weeks after the start of the semester, I walked into my classroom and, in my native broad Scots, said something like,

"Richt yuse tatty bogles, hawd yir wheesht, pin yer lugs back and gie's yir foo, foo mind, attenshun. I'm no goany waste ma brathe, ye ken. This is whit yill hear whaur a cum frae... An er's nuhin wrang wi it." The effect was instant and electric.

We made a deal that day, that they would do their best to speak to me in something like a common form of English that I had a *chance* of understanding, and I, in turn, would refrain from conducting all the rest of our lessons in broad Scots. I meant it too. I explained that there was nothing wrong with the way we speak in our own communities, that in fact Scots is considered closer to the oldest form of English, Anglo Saxon, than modern English. And I told them that some of the 'worst' of Appalachian speech 'errors', (ain't, for example), are simply archaic forms of English that were once quite 'proper' indeed. The English they were there to learn, I told them, was simply a convention that would allow a Scot and a Tennessee-an to understand one another.

And that was when 'the penny dropped'. In that moment, I was living in and out of a truth that others had already articulated; formal English is a theoretical language through which the world may communicate. *No one* speaks it. What that means is that my students, most students, had been set upon the path of an impossible educational quest, not just the task of 'improving' their own vernaculars, but of learning the 'right and proper' version of their own language.

In fact, the conventions and forms, the cadences and musical arrangements proper to formal English and those proper to their own dialects, are distinct and living forms. Each expresses the speaker's reality in a distinct and uniquely creative way.

This simple distinction exposes not only the futility of any method which attempts to resolve one idiolect into another, but also the underpinning lie that one language set is just a 'better' version of another and distinct set, and may be acquired by simply by 'polishing' the 'inferior form'. My students, (and I now believe *all* students), needed to learn Formal English as though it were a second and necessary, not superior, language, one that would be somewhat easier to acquire than an entirely foreign language, having a sufficiently common root to allow speakers of different idiolects to, (roughly), understand one another. Thus began the development of an ongoing 'immersion' strategy in my classrooms.

Everything that I have since tried, discovered, framed, articulated and reframed, followed from one 'light bulb' moment, from the convergence of choices, energies and dynamics in which occurred in that East Knoxville classroom. This is the context that matters because such living, breathing human expressions are the elements that power all real exploration and all true discovery, however objectively we may frame the propositions or observations that flow from them and however stringently we may, (as we should), test and scrutinize those propositions and observations subsequently.

Part of the personal reward of making this journey, has been the necessity-turned-opportunity it has afforded of re-examining my own educational history and of recognizing, for the first time, some of the common assumptions underpinning the educational programming to which I was subject, and the impact that these assumptions have had on my own perceptions of the nature and function of learning, of social competition, social 'class' and of what is meant by 'ability'. In each of these areas, I have discovered unexamined and unchallenged assumptions whose deconstruction or radical redrawing has left me with a sense of freedom and empowerment very much like that which I imagined, and still desire, for my students. This paper is one result of that exploration; it is a summary of the insights and discoveries obtained by inquiring into

the subjective educational experience of my students, discoveries which have become part of my own 'living theory'* and now underpin my educational practice.

From inquiry came realization and from realization came an astonishingly simple strategy which, I believe, holds out the hope of helping to resolve the growing logistical problem facing community colleges – that of the steadily increasing number of non-traditional and underprepared students who must reach college entry level English in increasingly short time periods and despite decreasing college budgets.

The Strategy and Rewriting the Narrative of the Developmental Student

<u>'Squaring the Circle' – a 'Brain Based' Strategy.</u>

In 2009, in response to this inquiry into student alienation from the Formal English of academia, I developed and began employing an 'audio book assignment', a language immersion strategy. I hoped that it might help my students acquire formal English – just as though it were a second language.

Each student was asked to choose and listen to readings of classic English literature, from a selection of free audio books, for a period of 20 to 30 minutes daily. Students were encouraged to listen to the English of Dickens, Austen, Swift, Twain or other classic authors whose modalities are formal, unfamiliar and difficult. As an aid to acquisition, they were asked to listen at bedtime, if possible, when most relaxed and receptive. (This was not a hard and fast rule. For many, it was more convenient to listen while driving, walking or doing chores – something repetitive, mechanical and boring and from which the audio book provided a kind of relief.)

I wanted to measure the efficacy of this strategy from the outset and elected to do so by creating a series of assignments that would allow me to track related

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* I coined the term 'living educational theories' (Whitehead, 1985, 1989) to distinguish two different kinds of explanations. In the first kind, explanations of individual educational practices are 'derived' from the abstract conceptualisations of traditional, propositional theories of the disciplines of education. In the second kind, the explanations are produced by individual practitioner-researchers to explain their educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead, As an Educator 4)

improvements, if any, in both competence and confidence in the students writing. I set compulsory, directed and reflective oral and written discussions of the 'audio book experience' at four-week intervals to provide assessment of:

01. Student perception of existing and changing relationship with the language;

02. Actual proficiency in mechanics;

03. Fluency, confidence, voice and emerging ownership.

These are the writing prompts:

Audio Book One.(The second graded blog of Module One, -/10)

What is the book about? Who wrote it? Why did you choose that book? Do you prefer reading a book or listening to one?

Audio Book Two (Second graded blog of Module Two, -/10)

Written language is structured differently from spoken language. Have you noticed a difference when *hearing* the way that language is structured in your audio book rather than just reading it? For instance, can you hear the clear beginnings and ends of phrases, sentences and paragraphs? What, so far, do you enjoy or not enjoy about the experience?

Audio Book Three (First graded blog of Module Three, -/10)

What is happening to your relationship with formal English? Can you 'hear' the voice speaking formal English in your head when you read it? Do you hear the ways in which people around you construct language that would not be considered 'formal'? Has it started to annoy you, yet, when you hear people misuse words or use slang? (Remember, whether or not we speak anything like formal English, words do have a standard spelling and meaning)! Do you 'hear' the punctuation and the rhythms in your audio book? How is that affecting your writing?

Audio Book Four - The Last Word.(First graded blog of Module Five,- /10)

What's your final word on this exercise? You know that voice in your head, the one that never shuts up? Well does it speak more formal English when it calls you names now? Will you continue with audio books or stop listening with relief? This blog is worth 10 points and should be 150 words in length. Thanks everyone!

The results were so startling that I have subsequently made this exercise mandatory for all my own students and it has now been piloted by a number of other full and part time faculty within the department.

What was, and still is taking place, is that audio renditions of precisely formal, or universal, English convert written text into the sounds of a language that is rarely

heard because it is only 'spoken' in the written word. When this is written language is read, however, students *can* be exposed to the sound patterns. When this occurs repeatedly, over a period of time, they begin to associate meaning with those patterns. This is precisely the process by which we first acquire language as infants – not through formal instruction but through familiarity with sound until it is associated with meaning, structure and mechanical form. Initial results suggest that the strategy redraws the map of possibility for many students who have been regarded as deficient in linguistic and sometimes, and mistakenly, intellectual ability.

> <u>Beginning</u>
> **J, Jan 26, 2010:** The "alchemist," by Paolo Coelho, is a story of a young shepard. The shepard is learning about the meaning of life. He does this through his experiences along the way. He dreams of having a beautiful women, of seeing the worlld, and of finding treasure. He meets exiciting people along the way. Those people send him in new directions throughout his quest. The shepard soon becomes wise to the ways of the world.
> <u>Middle</u>
> **J, Mar 2, 2010:** I do find the audio book popping up in my head, voices if you will. People I interact with on a daily basis, have a very slow way of speaking english. I hear them drag-out and miss-pronounce words. I can't give them too much grief, since I do the same thing. However, at times like these, I think of "The Alchemist." The English used in the audio book is very precise. The narrator does not use unneccessary dialog. The experience makes me want to use more precise dialog. I feel that if my words get anymore snappy, I will lose my job. I look forward to the next audio book; so that I can get this one out of my head. It will be quiet again! Ahhhh!
> <u>End</u>
> **J, Apr 20, 2010:** I find that lack of time and energy keep me from doing activities I really enjoy. Sitting down and reading a book of any substance is a time consuming process. Therefore, reading often gets put off. The audio book was nice because I did not have to stop what I was doing to enjoy it! I could still eat and drink while listening. I could still drive and listen to it. I could still work and listen to it. I hope you see a theme. Because of their versatility, audio books get an approval from me. Another great facet is the rewind option. If I lost track or trailed off for a moment, I could simply rewind the book and listen again. *(Reproduced with permission)*

I have included this example because of the enjoyment it affords to this reader. The salient details of the progress 'curve, however, tend to hold true for those students who undertake the assignment as prescribed, i.e. consistently and persistently. They develop levels of fluency, enjoyment, originality, ownership and confidence not normally associated with developmental students. Comparisons were also made between entry and exit writing samples of eighteen ability matched students, nine of whom did not complete the audio book assignment and nine of whom did. Mechanical

improvement tended to be comparable in both groups. However the 'listeners' showed a consistent and marked superiority in sophistication of ideas, language, engagement, ownership, risk taking and voice in general – qualities illustrated by the above example.[*]

A profoundly important lesson to be drawn from this evidence is, I believe, a truth long hidden in plain sight; the deficiency does not lie, and never has lain with the students; it lies with an educational approach which might have been designed to achieve the opposite of its actual purpose; that is, it could have been engineered to alienate most of our children from Formal English.

I also believe there may be two related and important reasons why a strategy as simple and as effective as language immersion has not been tried with English-speaking students of Formal English. The first is that we have inherited an educational system whose original function has already defined its culture and its paradigms. Any engineer can tell us that when we wish to identify and describe any manufactured object, we need only find its function. All the rest, form, dimension and internal design, will be explained thereby. Our educational system was designed to produce not creative and brilliant thinkers, but socialized workers:

> Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw materials [children] are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down. This demands good tools, specialized machinery, continuous measurement of production to see if it is according to specifications, the elimination of waste in manufacture, and a large variety in output, (Cubberley 388).

That system was focused upon product, not process and still is, since we have not yet begun to rethink the function of education in any meaningful way. Since there cannot be a meaningful change in form and design without a prior shift in function, we are constrained to work within the paradigms and assumptions that underpinned the 'factory' model, including those that underpinned the nature, teaching and modes of

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[*] See Appendix, 'Evaluation Example' Document.

learning of language. Thus, despite the pioneering work that has been undertaken since the 1990's, considerations about brain based learning, (that is of the connective processes that facilitate natural learning for the greatest benefit of the individual learner), remain outside the parameters of mainstream educational thinking:

> One of the only places operating largely as it did fifty years ago, would be the local school...Today as fifty years ago, any student from elementary school through college can complete this series of questions in exactly the same way without prompting:
>
> Q; How do you study?
> A. I read; I take notes; I make outlines, an I memorize
> Q. Why do you do this?
> A. For the test, (Nummela and Caine 14)...
>
> Emerging trends in educational practice both acknowledge and work with the complexity that exists in the classroom. These are more process-oriented approaches to education, such as thematic teaching, whole language approaches to literacy and the integration of the curriculum. Yet we are not adequately benefiting from them because process can be neither easily understood nor measured with the rational/experimental rsearch model. Hence a limited approach to research frustrates us in our search for ways to improve education, (Nummela and Caine 21).

The second reason, I suggest, is the long-standing association between fluency in Formal English and intelligence – or at least academic ability. The root of this misconception may be the apparently incontrovertible evidence that some children prove highly successful in developing fluency in written English while at school whereas others seem destined to remain at a remedial level whatever steps are taken to bridge the gap. The flaw in the evidence is a set of assumptions: that the method of teaching Formal English is substantially effective in and of itself; that it must produce the same results in all children of equal intelligence; and that the variable in the equation is therefore the ability and potential of the individual child.

In fact, the success of the audio strategy described here suggests something quite different, something that common sense would also propose. Those students who are exposed to the sounds, conventions and patterns of Formal English on a regular basis within their home environments, do much better in the classroom than those who are not.

They are able to respond to the demands of the syllabus because they have a basis of reference for the language already.

In other words, the true variable is not the ability of the individual student so much as 'the luck of the draw' when it comes to the key component of the learning process – authentic immersion. Those who must depend solely on the classroom and teaching methods that ignore this, the real basis of linguistic development, will struggle. Sadly, our current approach mistakes the methods traditionally employed in the classroom for the primary learning experience available to students of Formal English. It is not. In fact, for those who do not experience the language outside the classroom, it is not even a secondary resource. It is an irrelevance.

In summary, the existing narrative about 'remedial' readers and writers, supported by the 'evidence' of the success of 'more able' students, has predisposed remedial education to address a deficiency in the skills of the student, perhaps even in the student himself. The narrative does not suggest a fundamental deficiency in the traditional methods of teaching or a deficiency in the *luck* of the particular student. And this is the reason, I believe, that I am so often asked why, when the logic and the simple evidence of human development make the immersion strategy so absolutely obvious and simple, it has not been adopted before now... We do not find what we do not seek.

The Context of the Student

A 'Hostile' Language and the Means of Reconciliation.

Developmental students, almost universally, experience a profound 'disconnect' between the language in which they think and speak, (their idiolect), and the language in which they are required to write, formal English. So severe is the 'disconnect' between the language patterns and rules in which they habitually communicate, and which naturally belong to them, and those of formal English, which belongs to 'someone else', that developmental English students typically feel no personal stake in learning it. Indeed, for many of these students, their disengagement from written/formal English is

such that there is an actual aversion to it, so that the possibility of their ever becoming truly proficient in this alien and uncomfortable dialect is too remote to bother with.

In fact, the formal English required for College writing, the 'lingua franca' of the modern world, exists nowhere as a language in its own right. It is, quite simply, a convention, the agreed medium of communication by which peoples of the English speaking world may understand one another. Essentially, it is a second language for most of the English-speaking world – for this writer and for you, the reader. It is, indeed, a 'dead' language, just as spoken and written Latin was in the middle ages, existing in the ideal to which speakers and writers aspire; frequently visible in written form, it is rarely spoken and never occurs as a natural and original idiolect. When taught in schools, however, it is almost always presented normatively, that is, as the 'proper' version of all forms of the English language.

In practice, this means that 'formal' English is presented as though it were the only acceptable version of every idiolect of the English-speaking world. The greater the divergence of any vernacular from the patterns and rules of the proper 'norm', the greater is the degree of the perceived 'debasement' of that vernacular. Notwithstanding the fact that many extant dialects are closer to older forms of the English language than our ideal of formal English[*], the dialects of the vast majority of English speakers are rejected, either by inference or overtly, as inferior forms of this 'proper' English. Indeed, this has been the prevailing assumption of many, perhaps the majority, of those of us who have mastered universal English – and the orthodoxy of far too many classrooms.

There is an obvious and very serious implication here; if my idiolect, my natural mode of self-expression is part of my identity, then to the extent that my speech patterns are unacceptable or inferior – so am I. And if the linguistic conventions of my own family and community, those that help to bind me to them and reinforce my own identity, if these are 'inferior', then so is the world to which I belong. Students who have learned universal English from this standpoint, therefore, have undergone a kind of educational colonization. They have been confronted, from childhood, by a language

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[*] (As I explained to my students, 'Lallan' = or Lowland – Scots' is closer to Anglo Saxon, for instance and Appalachian to the upper class norms of 17th century English)

they have rarely heard and whose patterns of syntax and grammar are alien and difficult to follow. Worse yet, this is a language that, by virtue of its proposed 'superiority', testifies to their own linguistic and social 'inferiority'.

Such a cultural and historical context for our students' experience, and for the personal meanings that must derive from such an experience, provides us with a straightforward and compelling rationale, not only for the self doubt we see in so many developmental students of English, but for their palpable dislike, even resentment, of universal English – the language of colonization. They themselves may be incapable of articulating what has become part of the 'fabric of reality', incapable of recognizing the lie that has been presented as truth. It is simply 'how it is' in the world we live in. But it is little wonder that so few developmental students have any confidence in their abilities to develop reading and writing skills – or any real interest in doing so. Nor is it surprising that at the outset of the semester, (and too often at the end also), so many can discover no motivating interest in the discipline of writing beyond 'passing this course' so as to go on to something else.

Collective experience shows that, typically, in the course of a fifteen-week semester, a few students will experience a profound, positive shift in their relationship with written, universal English. Of the remainder, however, those who pass despite the persistence of somewhat thorny relationships with the language, now face the academic obstacle course of the college degree, where the medium of communication is that very same, universal English.

Self evidently, the quality of a student's relationship with the language of academia is liable to play a significant role in the final success or failure of his or her personal ambitions. (This success or failure is often more impersonally defined as the 'student retention rate'.) It is not simply that the constant struggle to follow instructions and prompts, and to converse (write) in this language will present a relentless struggle and a source of stress for such students. But the effects of the struggle will be felt more deeply still; for anyone who cannot learn the language of the country in which he or she resides, must remain always an outsider, a stranger in a strange land.

Two consequences are inescapable. One is obvious; it is the kind of academic failure associated with a general lack of proficiency in universal English. The second will be more or less invisible. It is a 'drop out' rate reflective of prolonged struggle and failure to progress in any field of study where competency in universal English is required. Clearly, then, not only in developmental programs, but also in labs and classrooms across campuses, the impact of the aforementioned 'disconnect' is being felt. It will be reflected both in student retention and success and 'failure' rates, and in the success of a college as a whole.

To summarize: for a large section of the student population, there exists a profound 'disconnect' from universal English which has an identifiable root cause and an unmeasured but significant impact. Since universal English is the lingua franca of academic discourse, fluency and confidence in its use play a crucial role in student success rates. Furthermore, this 'disconnect' is of importance for every college community because it directly influences the success of every student who struggles with universal English. And every student contributes to the success or failure of the college as a whole.

Non-traditional students represent a high percentage of our rising enrollment numbers and many of these students match one or more of the descriptions suggested for the 'developmental' student. That is, they are already disenfranchised from universal English, the common currency of academic communication. (And so, increasingly, are numbers of non-developmental students entering College English 101.)

If there exists a mechanism for successfully repairing the 'disconnect', it follows that this will have repercussions that reach far beyond our individual classrooms. (Though in the process, we may have to kill a few prevailing myths about the ability levels, the potential and the root causes of the 'negative' or 'lazy' or 'truculent' attitudes that arrive in our classrooms along with our disenfranchised students.)

Addressing the Disconnect.

Our 'first' language is acquired naturally, rather than learned. Indeed, it appears that the process of language acquisition is 'hard-wired' into the human brain through a

network of neural pathways that develop as we acquire our language*. (Modern language programs commonly favor emulating this process through 'immersion techniques' designed to promote the acquisition of language, and the requisite neural programming, in the same way that it occurs in early childhood – through repeated exposure to its sounds and the association of those sounds with perception and experience. For native speakers of any language, therefore, the conventions governing speech are internalized; we think in the language we speak and we use the rules of grammar and syntax naturally and unconsciously. When this is the case, the language can be said to 'belong' to us; it is a living part of us.

Written language patterns the spoken word. When we read the symbols of spoken language as written text, we do not so much see them and thence interpret their meaning as 'hear' the sounds they represent in our minds and then apply the learned interpretations of those sounds. Wired to the brain, then, is an association of sound with meaning. Sound is the direct symbol of the assigned meaning. The written word is only an indirect symbol of meaning, the symbol of the sound – or the symbol of the symbol. When the true native speaker learns to read and write in his or her language, there will be clear and obvious connections between the internalized conventions of speech and the rules governing the written symbols of those sounds – the 'rules' of writing. Because, of course, the rules of writing are nothing more or less than an agreed code to tell the reader how our written conversation ought to sound, or else what it would mean, if spoken.

Pause, falling intonation and breath, long pause, rising inflection, tone of authority – we don't need to learn the use of commas, periods, paragraph indentation, question or exclamation marks in order to use these in our speech. Obviously, then, if the rules of writing are directly related to the patterns of our own natural and internal speech, it will be a straightforward task to learn the code, (the mechanics of writing), that will allow us to express that natural speech through written symbols. (And once that direct relationship between conventions of speech and the rules of writing is learned, we can infer that a person may become a fluent reader and writer.)

Recent brain research has provided some incredible insights into language development, the gift that differentiates humans from other species and allows us to think, imagine, and express ourselves...

Each child has more than 50,000 nerve pathways that can carry sounds from the human voice from the ears to the brain. The brain encodes the words and actually rearranges its brain cells into connections or networks to produce language.

If a child hears little or no human sound, the brain waits in vain and eventually will "retire" these cells from this function and give these cells a different function. By age 10, if the child has no heard spoken works, the ability to learn spoken language is lost.

In the Indiana study, implants used in young deaf children to introduce human sound actually changed the brain structure so that these youth could begin constructing a vocabulary. The "use it or lose it" principle applies to the brain and language development. A University of Chicago study showed that babies whose mothers talked to them more had a bigger vocabulary. By 24 months, the infants of less talkative moms knew 300 fewer words than babies whose mothers spoke to them frequently. Babies are "listeners" and spoken language reinforces brain connections, which encourage more language development, (Fleming).

Language then, is 'hard wired', as it were. It follows that any sub-set of languages uses the same neural pathways, or connections, as our first language and that where a language set differs from our first language, we must create those 'set specific' pathways in the brain before we can use that language in the same way that we use our first language. In other words, through sound a language can move from the surface of our knowing, i.e. from something that we have knowledge *about*, to embedded knowledge, that is, something that we know as part of ourselves. Those who do not have the language 'hard-wired' or 'embedded', however, who do not 'own' the sounds of the language and the conventions governing them, will be unable to establish that direct relationship.

How, is it possible to learn the rules of the written code, rules that exist explicitly to tell the reader how something ought to sound, or what it ought to mean, if the student does not know how it ought to sound in the first place? In this case, there can

be *no* direct relationship between the conventions of speech, (the direct symbols of meaning), and the 'rules' that govern the indirect symbols of meaning (writing). Thus the language in which we write must refer directly to that which is 'hard–wired' into our brains; a language in which we can *think* must live in us before we can speak it, aloud or on the page, with a voice that is authentic – that is our own. But there are no native speakers of universal English, not even the Queen of England, for she speaks the dialect of the English aristocracy, as idiosyncratic in its way as any other.

The problem, then, is that the rules of writing are directly related to the patterns of an unspoken English, and not to those of our own idiolects. Here is where there exist both the gap that must be bridged, (the sine qua non of writing proficiency), and our opportunity to create such a connection for students of formal English, beginning with those who must take developmental writing. And here is also where returning to the natural, and organic mode of language acquisition can do far more than any newer or more technologically advanced approach can hope to do. In the realm of what is natural and human, the simplest and the most obvious solution is often the most powerful. The audio book strategy is one such solution.

SD (one week) The title of the audio book a lot'm listening to is the Hobbit by J.R.R Tolkien. It's the story about a hobbit who fines the ring of power. a lot chouse this book because it is very intresting to me and I like 25ythical creatures a lot. Pluse I hate reading, to me it's just a big wast of time but when listening to a book I can be doing what ever I want so I like listening to books a lot more than reading them.

SD (eleven weeks)
The book I've been listening to is the Lord of the Rings, the Return of the King and my favorite part was the fight between Frodo and golem, the description for that part was just amazing. I have enjoyed listening to the audio books; they have really helped me with my speech. At the same time the voice in my head will not stop, it's always correcting the people around me, and I don't want to correct them because I'm not about to hurt someone's fillings that's not me. I will most likely keep listening to audio books so I don't lose touch with proper English, and plus I have to take English 1010 next semester.

FW Feb 1, 2010 (two weeks) I have noticed that my brain is getting reprogrammed each night I listen to this book. When my wife and I went out to dinner this weekend, our waiter asked us if we would like some more rolls. My reply was "Indeed we would". I have never spoken those words before in my life.

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