Avoiding Appropriation

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When I was studying Intermediate Italian in a study-abroad program in Italy, I wrote for our last assignment a brief essay “Un Viaggio a Venezia” about a trip to Venice I had taken some weeks before. In my simple syntax and vocabulary, I explained the theme of my mini travel essay: despite the fact that we travelers—four students, another professor, and I—had conflicting interests and itineraries, we managed to negotiate and compromise so each person could do or see one thing she wanted to. We managed to shop for jewelry, masks, and shoes, feed the pigeons on St. Mark’s Square, eat pizza by the Grand Canal, and watch the parade of boats in celebration of the Feast of the Redeemer. I was proud of my composition because I felt I had successfully communicated a complex travel experience in a foreign language I had studied for less than a year.

The day after I returned to the United States, I received a friendly e-mail from my Italian teacher saying he had read and enjoyed my essay and had made just “a few corrections.” When I opened the attachment and read my essay, I realized that not only had he taken the time to type directly in my handwritten essay, but he had, in fact, typed in a different essay—a more accurate and sophisticated one with vocabulary and verb tenses I did not know how to use yet. It was still more or less my experience in Venice, but now more in my teacher’s language and my teacher’s voice. For example, my original opening sentence had read, in translation:

Trip to foreign cities are always a challenge, but when there are many travelers, the challenges become greater.

The revised sentence now read:

Trips in foreign lands are always challenging, but when the travelers are many, the challenges multiply.

At the time I didn’t know how to say either “challenging” or “multiply.” I had also written, rather clumsily, “Before the trip I had read my guidebook with a map,” but in the new version, “I had read my tourist guide and took a look at the topographical map.” Almost every sentence was changed and elevated to a higher register. I wondered if my original wordings were grammatically incorrect or just not as native- and mature-sounding as these new, improved ones. Perhaps my well-meaning, hard-working Italian teacher thought that it was inappropriate for a middle-aged American professor to sound like a graduate student. Realizing that his embarrassment for me might have motivated his editing, I felt ashamed of myself and the quantity and quality of his changes. Humbled second-language writing experiences such as this one (I have had many others) have enabled me to identify with the feelings of ESL writers who may also have overzealous teachers and tutors.

Reformulation and Appropriation

Helpful and generous as he was, my Italian teacher had revised my writing so it no longer sounded like me or reflected the state of my second language learning at the time. Ironically, I liked my original simple and nonidiomatic style; my hybrid Italian American voice expressed who I was and what I knew. On the other hand, I continue to learn from his edits: whenever I reread my transformed essay, I reinforce the authentic native expressions that real Italians use. The intent of my teacher’s “few corrections,” after all, was not to humble or discourage me, but to teach me the authentic Italian I needed to replace my interlanguage “Inglesiano.”

Such language learning is the main justification for the teaching strategy that Andrew Cohen calls reformulation that my teacher used. Recommended as an optional tutoring strategy for English as a second language (ESL) students, reformulation means correcting and revising second language writing, making it not only more grammatical, but more idiomatic and native-sounding. Reformulating, in effect, involves “native-speaker-izing” second language writing—changing the wording so that the writing sounds more like first language writing. To be accurate in our discussion, though, we should posit a continuum of second and first language writing instead of thinking in terms of two different poles: L1 versus L2 writing. In this case, reformulation would be reducing a lesser to greater number of second language features by replacing them with a lesser to greater number of native language features. Thus, reformulation ranges from slight to extensive.

For example, here is a sentence that Satomi, an ESL writer working in our writing center, wrote in her personal essay about calligraphy for her Rhetoric class:

It is said that in Japan to write own names well is to represent how intelligent people are.

Many options exist for revising Satomi’s sentence—from correcting the only actual grammar error (one’s own name versus own names) to reformulating
and "naturalizing" the sentence with gerunds and eliminating the copula "is" and infinitive "to represent":

It is said in Japan that writing one's name well represents how intelligent people are.

A second further reformulation would be to use the more idiomatic expression "a sign of" that might be in Satomi's passive but not active, working vocabulary:

It is said in Japan that writing one's name well is a sign of intelligence.

Yet a third, more extreme option would be to eliminate the passive voice expression "It is said":

The Japanese say that writing one's name well is a sign of intelligence.

Which reformulations would we say preserve Satomi's voice? Which distort or remove Satomi's voice? To what extent would such a judgment about the resulting voice depend on Satomi's input into the decisions of whether and how much to reformulate?

On some occasions, such as with my Italian essay, or perhaps with the third option for Satomi's sentence, when writing has been reformulated, we might evaluate the changed product as having been appropriated, or taken away from the student writer by the teacher, tutor, or editor. Appropriation usually involves the writer feeling, as I did when reading my Italian professor's corrections, a loss of voice, ownership, authorship, or emotional and intellectual connection to the writing and how it was composed. Such an event—when control of a text is removed from an author who then feels alienated from it—might be considered an "act of appropriation," although undoubtedly one can still learn language and about language use from the experience. On other occasions, however, when language has been reformulated in whole or in part by a teacher, tutor, or editor, for example, with the consent and participation of the student, we might conclude that the student's writing has not been appropriated. What are the situational factors that influence the evaluation of an act of reformation as appropriation or not? In this chapter, after giving a brief overview of the history of appropriation, I identify and discuss some of these situational factors with the help of tutors from the University of Iowa Writing Center, all of whom work intensively with ESL students.

### Some Background on Appropriation

In Composition Studies, issues of appropriation first arose in relation to native speakers of English (L1 writers) and the topics and content of their papers. As Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch have pointed out, teachers often wrest the direction of their students' writing from them so that they will write about what interests the teachers instead of what interests the students. Then students are confused or demoralized by having to puzzle out their teachers' expectations and write to fulfill them instead of writing from their own impetus and intentions. Teachers appropriate or take over the texts of their students when they respond to their students' papers with their own Ideal Texts in mind instead of negotiating with the students about what the students' intentions are and how best to fulfill them. Not only are students' texts removed from them by teachers, but more importantly, their control over these texts. Issues of appropriation, therefore, are usually issues of control over composing and revising. Who has more control of the text—the writer or the teacher or tutor? We can probably say that the more control the tutor, teacher, or editor has over the writer's text, the greater the likelihood of appropriation.

Control is also related to authority. Teachers take control of students' texts because they do not accord their students or their texts the authority they grant to canonical authors and their texts, according to Brannon and Knoblauch. Rather than struggle to get meaning from opaque student texts as they would do with a William Faulkner or Dylan Thomas work, they assume control over those texts and over the writers themselves. Brannon and Knoblauch and others, such as Nancy Sommers and Richard Straub, have recommended that teachers relinquish some of their authority and control over the students' texts and return it to their students, thus empowering them. They recommend that teachers act as respondents, informing students of the effects of their intentions and words on them as readers. Most tutoring guides, such as those by Toni-Lee Capossela and Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner, also recommend that tutors not interfere with their students' control of their texts. They advocate the tutor roles of collaborator, facilitator, coach, and consultant rather than more teacherly, controlling and directive roles of informant, editor, and evaluator.

### Appropriation and Foreign and Second Language Writers

Well-meaning teachers and tutors can exert too much control over the topics, content, and development of their ESL students' papers, although the motivation for their assuming control may be different than it is with native speakers. The motivation to control may stem from disparity in cultural knowledge; either the tutor or student may have more cultural expertise, depending on the topic of the assignment. Sometimes the assignment situation seems to demand the tutor's directiveness. In our roles as cultural informants advocated by Judith Powers and surrogate academic audience advocated by Joy Reid, we tutors often know more about the assigned U.S. culture-bound topics of students' papers than our ESL students do, especially if they are international students who have lived for only a short time in the United States, but must still write convincingly about U.S. culture, history, or controversies. Unless students can interpret and stretch their assignments to compare, for example, birth control and reproduction in China with those practices in the United States, they may have no other choice but to use the tutor's background information or stance on these U.S. controversies. Sometimes it is only with the historical
context and position provided by the tutor that the student is able to make sense of the material he has gathered from researching the controversy. This kind of assignment-induced appropriation often cannot be avoided without more widespread changes; writing programs would have to allow ESL students a choice of controversies and/or provide courses with international or multicultural curricula, such as those recommended by Paul Matsuda and Tony Silva.10

Ironically, a kind of reverse cultural appropriation can also occur when the topics for writing are from the student's own culture. In Composition and ESL classes and in writing centers such as ours in which ESL students do personal writing, well-meaning teachers and tutors often urge ESL students to write about (too) familiar topics such as the Moon Festival or Chinese New Year, even when, as Ilona Leki points out, those topics might be considered stale, providing little opportunity to discover new ideas and personal meaning.11 Call it the equivalent of "What I Did on My Summer Vacation."

Most commonly, the issue of appropriating second language writing in general arises not in relation to control of topic or content, but to control of language. Here the disparity is in linguistic knowledge, not cultural knowledge; the linguistic repertoire of a tutor who is a native speaker of the language is far greater than that of her students. My Italian teacher was much more likely to exert control over my Italian phrasing than he was to ask or require me to write on a trip to Florence, or on an American holiday such as the Fourth of July. As a result of his elevating my style in the direction of his ideal Text, some of my voice was sacrificed for increased vocabulary or, more precisely, passive vocabulary, because I cannot guarantee I will use those new expressions correctly when I try them in different contexts in the future.

The Trade-Off Between Voice and Authentic Language

I felt that some of the language of my travel essay had been appropriated and some of my voice was lost because I was satisfied with sounding like an American English speaker and Intermediate Italian learner in this foreign language situation; I had become accustomed to reading my personal writing in L1 or L2 in a possibly self-indulgent manner—as if I were looking in a mirror. Thus, as I read my work, I expected to see and hear myself, not someone else.

Yet my situation as a foreign language learner and writer is unquestionably different from a second language situation with a second language learner and writer. I was simply writing mini travel essays, not studying in a degree program, taking rigorous humanities and social and natural sciences in Italian, and competing with Italian native speakers writing research papers, exams, and dissertations. With these pressures and challenges, more ESL writers may be more willing to trade some of their voice for accuracy, idiomaticity, and increased language learning. If I as a tutor had made the equivalent changes in the essay of an ESL student in the writing center, would she also feel as if I had appropriated it? Probably not—if she had expressed the desire to sound as native as possible, if she had participated in making the changes, and if I had done my best to explain why particular expressions were ungrammatical or unidiomatic. What had contributed to my sense of appropriation was not only my satisfaction with sounding nonnative, but also my not understanding the reasons for my teacher's changes and my lack of participation and control in making them.

Avoiding Appropriation

We can identify from these discussions the situational factors that can contribute to avoiding appropriation in tutoring ESL students in the writing center. When and how are we more likely to avoid appropriation? Paralleling the discussion of the continuum of second and first language writing features, appropriation should also be discussed in terms of probabilities and of gradations on a continuum of tutor and writer control and directiveness, as Straub recommends,12 and not in terms of absolutes. It is not always clear—to a tutor or even to an outside observer such as a researcher—when appropriation has taken place, except possibly when a writer thinks and feels at a gut level that it has. If the notion of "appropriation" is applied in a judgmental fashion every time a tutor suggests changing an expression on an ESL student's paper and replacing it with a more idiomatic one—a labeling that Reid calls a "myth of appropriation,"13 it will cause unnecessary tutor anxiety, paralysis, and guilt and the term will ultimately lose its meaning.

To avoid appropriation, then, tutors should strive to do the following:

1. Accord the ESL writer authority. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we accord ESL students authority as fluent, proficient speakers of, and writers in their own native languages and advanced speakers and writers in English who may know more about the rules of English syntax, grammar, and usage than we do. When we compare their proficiency in English with ours in our L2, we can gain an appreciation and admiration for their amazing achievements. By respecting their authority as bilingual speakers and writers, as knowledgeable students of their disciplines, and as cultural informants about their own native languages and cultures, we are less likely to assume control of their texts and impose our ideal ones.

2. Work on higher-order concerns (HOCs) before lower-order concerns (LOCs). We are more likely to avoid appropriating language and voice if we adhere to the principle of higher-order concerns versus lower-order concerns recommended by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad.14 The assignment, focus, argument, development, and organization are usually more important than expression unless some language clarifications and corrections are needed simply in order to understand whether the student has followed the assignment and to understand her points. In the case of language completely obscuring
argument, the level of language would be considered a higher-order and global concern. Otherwise, there is no point in working carefully and slowly to reformulate language that should not or probably will not appear in the next draft because the student needs to refocus or revise her entire argument.

3. Address expressed needs. We are more likely to avoid appropriation when students, especially more advanced students and English learners, tell us that they want their writing to sound as much like that of native English speakers as possible. We can endlessly debate whether ESL writers should feel they should sound like native speakers rather than themselves, but the fact is, many do, especially advanced undergraduates and graduates, faculty, and visiting scholars; the feedback and pressure they receive from their professors, their supervisors, their dissertation advisors, and their journal editors convinces them that they need to feel this way.

As Kathy Lyons, one of the University of Iowa writing center tutors, noted, “When you factor in what’s at stake for these more advanced students (opportunities for publication, the need to write a defendable thesis, jobs), it seems wrongheaded to resist their desire to gain mastery over American writing styles. . . . In resisting the request of an ESL student to help with learning the ‘American way’ or simply the ‘standard English’ way of expression something, we might be doing a great disservice, though with the best of intentions. We should be prepared to do what’s in the student’s best interest and to allow her to learn what she feels is important to her own professional and/or educational advancement if that is what she is asking us to do.”

However, shouldn’t we work to convince the gatekeepers in graduate and professional schools and in academic departments and on editorial boards that second language writers will probably always write with an accent? We should support the efforts of second language writing has made, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s resolution to educate teachers about the length of the second language writing acquisition process and how, according to Virginia Collier, it takes at least seven years to acquire an academic vocabulary. (See Chapter 4 for more about this.) However, until teachers and other gatekeepers are sufficiently educated and become more tolerant of accents and nonnative features in writing, some ESL students will ask to be taught how a native English speaker would say what they suspect they are saying awkwardly. Such requests might put pressure on a hands-off tutor into taking what I have called a more assimilationist stance, so that the student’s writing will blend better into the linguistic mainstream of American Academic English.

YiYun Li, a Chinese English bilingual writing center tutor at the University of Iowa, creative writer published in The New Yorker, and former microbiologist, is similar to Lyons when it comes to responding to students’ expressed needs. Her perspective as an ESL writer who has both tutored and been tutored is especially valuable. “As an ESL student myself, I understand that students really hope to learn the most correct English from our tutors. I remember in our writing center class last year, we talked about whether we should want our students to write like Americans. The concern was that they would love their uniqueness. But a lot of times, this uniqueness is just what makes them uncomfortable about their own writings. For myself, I usually ask my readers to point out all things that sound unusual for a native speaker. Some of them I know I have put in intentionally to give the writing a little foreign-ness, but with others, I just don’t know the right ways, and I always feel happy to learn how to say them right.”

Writer-tutors like YiYun would want tutors to point out instances of inadvertent or intentional poetry in their writing so they can decide whether they want to leave them in their texts or reformulate them. Such writers want control over when they are sounding foreign or even, ironically, when they are sounding inappropriately colloquial—for example, when they are using the word stuff incorrectly or overusing it to try to sound like native English speakers. If their writing contains foreign features, they want to know it is because of a conscious decision on their part, not an accident or a result of not knowing an expression or idiom. In this case, the ESL writer paradoxically has control over the tutoring situation even when it seems that the tutor has more control over the writer’s language. What might seem like appropriation to an outsider unfamiliar with the expressed needs of the writer is actually a balanced tutorial interaction.

If tutors are not sure how unique or how much like native English speakers their students want to sound, they should ask them rather than guess. They should have a frank discussion of the pros and cons of leaning toward either pole. Such meta-discourse—communicating about how to communicate—is probably the most significant way to avoid appropriation. For confusing passages, tutors can generate with the student’s help two or three options that vary in idiomaticity, style, or register and ask the student to choose among them, as in the previous options for revising Satomi’s sentence.

4. Select particular passages to work on. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we prioritize and select passages from a student’s writing to revise. Because there may not be time in one tutoring session and because it could be cognitively overwhelming for both tutor and student to reformulate all nonnative constructions, a few should be chosen, particularly:

- global problems that interfere with meaning, as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva recommend (See also Chapters 6 and 7.)
- nonidiomatic passages about which the student expresses concern
- features that are ungrammatical rather than just nonidiomatic

5. Ask writers to participate in reformulation decisions. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if students actively participate in the reformulation
and revision process and more importantly, in the meta-discourse about the process. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, such participation is said to increase the chance that language learning takes place, as Jennifer Ritter points out. Even if ESL students request a reformulation of their paper, when a tutor revises for them rather than with them, it is possible that that tutor crosses the line, as Molly Wingate says, into appropriating the students’ texts. University of Iowa tutor LuAnn Dvorak tells students who pressure her to change all incorrect or nonidiomatic features that they will not learn if she fixes everything for them; there is just too much new language in new contexts, she explains, for them to process in too little time and with too little participation on their part.

One common way for the student to participate is to read her own paper aloud and stop or put a check mark when she thinks a passage does not communicate well because it is ungrammatical, unnatural, or both. The tutor might stop her when he does not understand a passage to ask her if she can explain it. Another way for the student to participate more is for tutors to participate less, thus balancing the interaction. To establish this balance, we need to monitor the ways in which we are participating. Megan Knight, another University of Iowa writing center tutor, tries to limit herself to asking ESL students questions and mirroring what they have said.

6. Use speaking-into-writing strategies. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we use speaking-into-writing techniques that utilize the student’s direct spoken language. This helps to capture and preserve his voice. Marilyn Abildskov, a former University of Iowa tutor and now a creative writing professor, says that “Tell me more” is the best question tutors can ask to elicit both participation and content for writing and to reflect the writer’s voice. “Tell-me-more” questions about expression cause the student to clarify her intended meaning and often result in language that is clearer and more idiomatic than what is on the page. Working from reading aloud and from speaking in order to rephrase written passages is what University of Iowa tutor John Winzenburg calls the “outside-in approach.” In contrast, “the inside-out approach,” he says, is when the ESL writer is concentrating on how she thinks she should write rather than on what she is trying to say. By having the student verbalize and converse to find and revise written language, University of Iowa tutor Jen Ryan says she ensures that the voice on the page is not an English voice or, for example, a Chinese voice, but the student’s voice.

7. Explain the recommended changes. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we offer brief explanations for why the student’s passage is faulty and why our recommended changes are better, rather than just writing or typing them on the page. If the feature is based on a rule and the tutor can explain the rule, then this provides an opportunity for learning and carries over to the next writing rather than just repairing that one expression. For example, I would tell Satomi that the words “own ________” are preceded by a possessive adjective: my own car, one’s own name. Why this word or expression and not that? Why should we say two chemicals “competed” with another to bond with a third chemical rather than “contended” with one another? Look up both words in the dictionary together to learn the connotations and contexts. Why this verb form and not another? Why a gerund rather than an infinitive in the second reformulation of Satomi’s sentence? The changed construction has fewer words, is more economical and streamlined, and is easier to process, even though the infinitive in the original sentence was not ungrammatical. If a tutor doesn’t know the explanation, then rather than invent one, it is best to look it up together in a grammar book or ask the tutors sitting next to you. We don’t have to have an explanation for every change we suggest; indeed, students may not want or need them, and there may not be enough time for them, but “this is the way we say it in English” should not be our explanation for every change or replacement.

8. Try to assess language learning. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if the student learns new language or more about language from the interaction and reformulation. It is difficult to determine whether learning has taken place because writing centers do not test, and they often don’t see the same students regularly enough to monitor their learning. Yet, tutors who find themselves correcting and explaining the same features week after week should be aware that the student is possibly not participating enough in the exchange or the explanations are not communicated well. (See Chapter 2.)

9. Avoid misrepresenting the student’s language level on the page. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if our recommended changes and the resulting reformulation do not project a level of language proficiency and sophistication that is inaccurate. Intermediate ESL students should not come across as advanced on a paper after a few trips to the writing center. Ethical issues are involved in misrepresenting the student’s language level to outside audiences of teachers and other gatekeepers. Such misrepresentation is unfair not only to these audiences, but to the students themselves. What if I submitted my teacher’s revision of “Un Viaggio a Venezia” to an Italian program and was admitted on the basis of my supposed ability to manipulate the language, but then could not understand my courses and professors? When readers of reformulated essays compare them to the students’ in-class writing and speaking, they may feel betrayed by both the students and the writing center. (See Chapter 10.)

10. Consider the type of writing. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we gauge the purpose, genre, and type of writing we are working on with the student. Informal writing, narratives, and reader-responses may benefit more from nonidiomaticity and features of the student’s unique voice; formal essays, abstracts, proposals, and dissertations may benefit less. For example, if Satomi writes in a personal essay that her hometown is “abundant of green,”
we might let it go and not comment about it at all. Or we might compliment her on her poetic phrasing, but at the same time mention that native English speakers might say "abundantly green" or "very green." But if Satomi writes "abundant of green" to describe a land mass in a formal geography paper, we would more likely point out the lack of idiomaticity and offer the previous options. These decisions—whether to point out such instances and whether and how to change them, even in personal writing—should be negotiated with the student.

A Ten-Step Program?

Must all ten conditions be met and all the strategies implemented within a tutoring session in order to avoid appropriation? Some of these conditions and strategies are undoubtedly more significant than others. Responding to the writer's expressed needs and feelings (#3), ensuring the writer's participation (#5), and not misrepresenting the writer's second language proficiency level (#9) are probably the most important criteria and advice for avoiding appropriation, although not necessarily in that order. Most important, periodic meta-communication and perception-checking about whether and how to reformulate will work to help tutors avoid taking control over ESL students' texts and voices. Just as the travelers in my Italian essay negotiated and compromised but still met their needs and goals, so should tutors and ESL writers.

Notes

13. Reid, 290.
14. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
17. Severino, 190.

20. Wingate, 9.

Works Cited


