



What Is Native Fluency? The Ambiguous Nature of Bilingualism and Its Ramifications for Writing Instruction

Susan Behrens, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Marymount Manhattan College

Cindy Mercer, Academic Achievement, Marymount Manhattan College

Part I—High School

Maria moved from the Dominican Republic to New York City with her family when she was nine years old. She was a native Spanish speaker who also spoke a good deal of English, which she had picked up in school. She was an average student in the Dominican Republic, read at grade level, and made B's and C's in math. Neither of her parents spoke English before arriving in the United States, and her mother never learned; therefore, the family spoke Spanish at home. However, Maria appeared to be coping well in most subjects both in the Dominican Republic and once she moved to the U.S. That is, until high school.

She was put in a regular high school program with an added hour each day of English as a Second Language (ESL). ESL classes mainly targeted her written English skills, which were poor. Maria did not like the idea of being an “ESL student” since she had spoken English since she was little, but she accepted the fact that there was room for improvement.

Maria made good progress, becoming more fluent and confident in English. She made a point of conversing with her new friends and classmates in order to practice her English and to try to fit in. They were happy to coach Maria in her language skills. Her neighborhood, Jackson Heights, was heavily Colombian, so she could still meet and make friends who spoke Spanish. This helped her relax a bit, since it was always easier for Maria to express herself in Spanish. Sometimes her friends from Colombia used an expression or word she wasn't familiar with, but she enjoyed learning new Spanish from them.

Maria felt equally proficient in Spanish and English, although by this point she had received more education in English. Overall, she felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish. She could clearly see the problems confronting her mother, a non-English-speaking immigrant, and hoped to have a freer, more independent life as a native speaker of English. Maria considered herself truly bilingual.

But something was not right in her high school classrooms. She continued to have a difficult time with writing assignments in all of her classes. Her papers would usually be returned to her with such comments in the margins as “awk” and “S-V agree” and “sing-plural confusion.” Maria never actually understood these comments, but since she never was asked to fix them, the same comments appeared again and again on her papers. She never received an A on a paper.

Maria tried to sit in the back of the classroom so her teachers wouldn't call on her. Her accent was heavier than some of the other students who had arrived from their home countries around the same time. She worried that something she said might come out "awk" or her "S-V" might not agree, so she felt it was better to keep quiet. By the end of her freshman year, she wasn't feeling too bilingual. In fact, the whole question of language ability and bilingualism occupied her thoughts more and more. Other students seemed much more comfortable with their identity than she did, either because they considered themselves "Latino" or because they possessed more academic English skills.

Question 1—If Maria is bilingual, why might she be experiencing such difficulties with written English?

In spite of her problems in writing and speaking in class, Maria had a decent grade point average. Most of her assignments were multiple choice and fill in or matching exercises, so by studying hard she could off-set the low grades she got on her papers with A's on her exams.

Her teachers were a bit confused by Maria, however. Here was a student who could make decent grades, yet was seemingly sullen and silent in class and lazy on her written assignments. They heard her speak fluent English with her friends in the hallways, but her papers contained misspelled words, typos, grammatical errors, and unusual sentence structures. They concluded that she was smart but not highly motivated.

In fact, Maria's writing teacher noted that Maria made many writing errors typical for high school students: subject-verb agreement, pronoun use, and possessive formation. But her teacher wondered about Maria's other, more unusual, lapses, such as poorly formed tense markers (e.g., "would have reacting differently"; "would have interrupt") and confusion of adjectives and adverbs. In addition, Maria's writing demonstrated a limited English vocabulary. These problems led the teacher to suspect language impairment.

Question 2— Why would Maria's writing teacher wonder about language impairments? What other factors—educational, cultural, or personal—might account for Maria's problem?

Part II—College

Four years later, Maria graduated from high school with a C+ average. She took the SAT and scored 330 on the verbal and 440 on the math. She was accepted into an opportunity program at the local college, which thrilled her whole family. The first in her family to go to college in the U.S., Maria felt proud and very bicultural. She was also glad she was done with the stigma of ESL and developmental classes that she felt labeled her as a non-native English speaker or, worse, as stupid.

Her new college required Maria to take a placement exam to determine which writing class she should register for. Students had 45 minutes to write a two-page essay about a book or play they read in high school, and why it influenced their decision to continue their education at the college level. Maria had never written so much, all at once, on the spot. She got very nervous and ran out of time. In addition, she was sure there were “awks” and other errors in the essay that she handed the proctor. In fact, her score was so low on the test that she didn’t qualify for the First Year Seminar course. Maria was enrolled in Writing Skills 01 (WS 01) instead, a non-credit bearing course in basic English. The course was designed to ease the transition to academic English. The syllabus listed the following student objectives:

At the end of this course, each student can expect a working knowledge of various writing and reading skills, including:

- 1. A working knowledge of grammatical structures*
- 2. An understanding of the inter-related processes of speaking, listening, reading and writing*
- 3. The ability to pre-write, plan and formulate critical questions, interpret and discern facts for reading and writing purposes*
- 4. The ability to proofread, edit, and revise*

In WS 01, Maria found both native and non-native English speakers from many different home countries. Some were more proficient in English than Maria, but some had stronger accents and weaker English. At least there were native speakers in the class! “Even bilingual speakers like me need practice writing,” Maria told herself. Still, the placement test did nothing to increase her confidence.

Question 3—Why is Maria so resistant to the idea of ESL courses? What other stigmas do academically unprepared students face?

Their professor, who encouraged the students to call him Max, was a young man still in graduate school working as an adjunct at Maria’s college. He seemed very relaxed and accepting of all the students. On her first paper, Maria received a B+ and a “Good!” This was a first for Maria as a writer.

Maria grew more confident and began participating in class. She also started to enjoy the class and the assignments. They wrote one- to two-page papers weekly on such topics as “My Favorite Hobby” and “My Dream Job.” Instead of those old, familiar comments in the margins, her papers came back with suggestions for revisions. Max took a great deal of time on each student’s paper, re-writing awkward sentences and re-organizing disorganized paragraphs. He believed in validating the writers’ ideas and de-emphasizing errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. His students were in WS 01 to uncover and organize their thoughts. Spell checking tools and tutors would take care of the rest. At the end of the term, Maria received a B+ in the course. Max saw real progress over the 14 weeks in Maria’s efforts and rewarded her with a high grade to encourage her to continue to practice her writing.

In fact, though, Maria’s writing was still poor, even after revision and sessions with Max, as seen in the two excerpts below:

Sample 1—Writing	Sample 2—Paragraph from a Revised Paper
<p>In my own opinion I believe on how the storyteller takes the fact about someone interrupting him. Everybody feel differently in situation. For example, some people don't mind sharing their sex life or listening to someone else sex life.</p>	<p>Many two years colleges accept student without their high school diploma. Most of those students receive help from the government. Gov. George E. Pataki disagree, he believes that students who don't have their diploma shouldn't receive help from the government until they complete 24 credits. The government discovered that some colleges gave students financial aid to those who don't qualify so that they would collect their money. Then students would drop out and cancel their students' loans. So this won't occur, now students need to take a test in order to get government help by the Department of Education.</p>

Question 4—Compare the samples of Maria’s writing to the course objectives and determine to what degree this course appears to meet Maria’s needs.

Part III—The Next Term

The B+ allowed Maria to enroll in First Year Seminar (FYS) in the spring term. On the first day, her professor, Dr. Clarkson, handed out a 12-page syllabus for the course. Students were required to write three 10-page essays and read five books during the term.

The learning goals and objectives of FYS were listed on the syllabus as follows:

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

- 1. Participate more fully in the rigors of collegiate academics*
- 2. Appreciate the value of in-depth exploration from several disciplinary perspectives*
- 3. Read college-level texts with increasing confidence*
- 4. Engage in intensive critical thinking and writing*
- 5. Understand the composition process*
- 6. Compose effective academic essays*

Maria left that first class meeting shaking. This was not the atmosphere she had come to associate with a writing class. The next meeting, Maria sat as far back in the room as she could and reverted to her silent mode. Everyone in the class seemed to speak fluent, native-sounding English. Professor Clarkson kept emphasizing the rigors of the college-level material they would cover, and how this class was not going to be a repeat of high school. She assigned a four-page summary and critique of an essay by Julia Kristeva entitled “Toccatina and Fugue for the Foreigner.”

“Was Dr. Clarkson trying to tell me something?” Maria thought. That she was still a foreigner in this country? That she wasn’t bilingual, wasn’t a native speaker of English? Maria took the plunge and wrote about her own experiences coming to the U.S. and graduating from last term’s developmental course. The paper was returned with a big “See Me” across the top. Dr. Clarkson told Maria she shouldn’t be in this class, that she should have registered for WS 01. And, she added, was Maria signed up for ESL tutoring? Maria burst into tears.

Question 5—What was the disconnect between a B+ in a skills course and potential failure in a college-level course?

Dr. Clarkson checked Maria’s transcript and was very concerned that this student, so weak in writing and reading skills, not to mention critical thinking, received a B+ in WS 01. She went to the Writing Center and spoke to the director, Dr. Marc. While Dr. Marc was new to the college, he already saw the problems with the pre-credit courses. There weren’t enough of them to have a year-long sequence; moreover, there was no exit exam to ensure preparation for the credit-bearing First Year Seminar, little supervision of the adjuncts, and no uniformity of the syllabi. He sympathized with Maria’s plight and offered to sign her up with a tutor every week for the term. Dr. Clarkson accepted this solution as reasonable, and Maria agreed to attend tutoring.

The next writing assignment for the seminar class was a difficult one: read two essays concerning whether professors should express opinions in the classroom, one written from the point of view of “neutral teaching” and one from an advocate of passionate teaching. Write a five-page paper comparing and contrasting the viewpoints. Dr. Clarkson gave Maria an extra week to do this assignment and work with the tutor.

When the paper was handed in, Dr. Clarkson was even more concerned. This was not Maria's writing. Clearly, the tutor had done most of the work on this paper. Another "See Me" on the paper brought Maria to Dr. Clarkson's office. While the professor didn't accuse Maria of plagiarism or wrong-doing, she did ask how the tutoring sessions were structured. Maria would talk aloud her ideas and the tutor would translate them into writing. Then the tutor would read the passage back to Maria to ensure that was what Maria meant.

Besides the actual language not being Maria's, the paper was mainly a summary of the two articles. The critical thinking was weak, with almost no argumentation and clear comparison or contrast between the authors' viewpoints. Dr. Clarkson could not give the paper a passing grade.

Now, instead of tears, Maria got very angry. She had put in so much time and work; she had done what everyone told her to do. Yet, she was still failing. Her other classes weren't as difficult. Partly, this was because she again encountered multiple choice and fill-in tests. Dr. Clarkson was the only professor who demanded such work from her.

She was also still insulted by a question Dr. Clarkson had asked her early in the semester: "When did you start learning English?" And the suggestion that Maria enroll in ESL classes. Perhaps she was being discriminated against because of her accent. Maria decided to complain.

Question 6—Was Professor Clarkson's response to Maria's problems appropriate? Did it take cultural diversity into consideration?

Question 7—What can instructors do to help students like Maria who have difficulty with academic language/writing skills?

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