"Speaking" Their language: Understanding the Perspective of Multilingual Learners through a Student-Centered Video Creation Project

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This chapter describes three educational videos made by a highly collaborative student-faculty team that examined varying pedagogical challenges faced by multilingual, international learners at our university. The project originated several years ago, after discussions in a two-year faculty learning community led two participating professors to propose and then receive a grant to form a team that would examine such issues from a distinctly student-centered perspective. The ensuing videos have served as aids in faculty workshops and regional conferences, and as an ongoing digital resource on our university website (iteach.msu.edu). Each video presents a scenario that surfaces multilingual students' perspectives in response to a different instructional move; the videos then ask the teacher-viewer to identify the problem that is being portrayed; finally, each video proposes an array of pedagogical solutions. Overall, the project exemplifies the affordances of digital writing: through the team's choice of video as the most effective means by which to communicate multilingual student concerns to faculty and, through its unplanned adaptive response to the pandemic, collaboratively meeting and co-creating its products online.

Since the 1950s, many U.S. universities have witnessed a steady growth in enrollment by international students, with a surge in 2009 and the first-ever decrease in 2019 (Israel & Batalova, 2014).[1] The phenomenon has brought opportunities as well as challenges to faculty who are unaccustomed to working with this cohort. In *International Educator*, Marian Kisch (2014) identified a variety of such

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issues, including different cultural attitudes toward plagiarism and intellectual property, difficulties adapting to group work, lack of necessary English skills, and unfamiliarity with common cultural references (pp. 44-45).

This paper describes how a team of undergraduate students and university faculty responded multimodally to the dramatic increase in the numbers of international (and multilingual) students at their institution—a 5 to 8% increase yearly over an eight-year span, or 40% growth from 2008-2018 ("International," n.d.)—until the overall population of international students represented one in every 13 students, and comprised as much as 80% of the students in their first-year writing courses, especially the WRA 1004/0102 Preparation for College Writing (PCW). For a variety of reasons—including the pandemic and visa restrictions, along with anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S.—these numbers are currently down, but at the time this project launched, the institution was engaged in numerous initiatives, as it attempted to respond supportively to this student population. The two teachers engaged in the project described here, for example, participated in a two-year program where they, along with four other teachers and two administrators, met monthly to actively reimagine the learning goals and curriculum of PCW; eventually, course goals were reframed to center the mostly multilingual students' languages and cultures as sites of inquiry and resources for learning. One of these teachers, along with another from the original group, subsequently participated in a two-year university learning community that discussed how to better support the university's international student population and, currently, one of these two instructors also facilitates another such group that encompasses both faculty and staff, especially advisors and administrators. Relevant to this paper, these various initiatives also evolved into the formation of a faculty-student team that has been creating videos that describe and address specific challenges a multilingual student may face; they have also been facilitating faculty workshops for teachers on- and off-campus. This evolution has not always been easy, though, as team members (both students and faculty) graduated and/or moved to other institutions, and then the pandemic occurred, which necessitated that the project move online.

Currently, the team utilizes both online and in-person modalities and consists of two faculty along with four undergraduate students who come from diverse countries (Thailand, Malaysia, China and, most recently, Ghana), and have different majors (mathematics, supply chain, communication, and geography). The two current faculty members are both white, U.S.-born, middle-aged and middle-class females, but they bring to the table extensive experience with other languages and cultures. One, born into a family of Polish immigrants, grew up in a bilingual household and has taught writing to university students in Harbin, China. The other has lived and taught EFL in

Europe (France, Italy, and the Republic of Ireland) for 25 years, and earned her doctorate at the Sorbonne. Both instructors are familiar with the experience of being "other" or outsider in professional and educational settings, and both are strongly committed to ongoing work in support of international, multilingual students at Michigan State University.

The videos themselves originate from primary sources: the faculty experiences of teaching EFL/ESL and writing to multilingual learners (along with their participation in multiple university groups addressing similar issues) as well as the undergraduate students' own experiences as international, multilingual students studying in the U.S. Additionally, there is secondary research (as shared and discussed among the team members) on the specific topic examined in each video. Titled "Why won't they understand my lecture?" the first video depicts multilingual international students struggling to understand their economics professor's U.S.-centric cultural reference of football—a scenario that imaginatively re-configures the *actual* experiences of one of our team's former members, an undergraduate student from China. In considering this scenario, the team's two faculty members theorized the concept of the "double learning": that is, the learning the multilingual students had to do, the discipline-specific economics lesson of the supply/demand curve, *and* the corresponding "lesson" of fluctuating offensive and defensive lines in football. This first video also drew on insights garnered from the team's shared reading and discussion of the general challenges international students face in making cultural adjustments when they study abroad (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Lee, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2010), as well as Anthony Robins' (2010) discussion of the "learning edge momentum," which analyzed how students build new knowledge most effectively in relationship to what they *already* know and understand. Similarly, the team's next two videos ("Why won't they talk?") and ("Why won't they write grammatically?") were based both in the team's own experiences (both teachers' and students') and in their shared discussion of relevant scholarship. Drawing on Xuan Zheng (2010) and Ozgur Yildirim (2017), for instance, the second video unpacks the purported "silence" of international students in U.S. classrooms, as it portrays the ways in which instructors might contribute to this seeming non-participation: e.g., the speed at which the teacher speaks and the limited time they give students to read (much less process) articles assigned for in-class discussion. Instead, our video suggests that teachers intentionally scaffold class material and provide readings ahead of class-time so that *all* students can more fully participate. In turn, the third video portrays the not-atypical dilemma of the international student who receives a paper back from his (presumably U.S.) instructor: full of line-by-line red marks and exclamation points. The video then surfaces the students' baffled, disappointed response to the paper, along with some

of the more common grammatical "interferences" of home languages (like Mandarin and Arabic) that may emerge in international and/or multilingual students' writing, and it cautions instructors against writing assessments that are too prescriptively grammatical. The video's points are based on the work of translingual scholars like Suresh Canagarajah (2016) and Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner (2013), who argued for classroom recognition of the porous and rhetorically shifting aspects of languages and languaging rather than an adherence to absolute standards, as well as the recommendations of ESL scholars who support formative, strategic writing assessment and a "don't grade what you don't teach" pedagogical approach (Brown, 2012).

All three videos are now available both on the university's iteach.msu.edu website and on *YouTube*, thus serving as an ongoing resource for faculty campus-wide and beyond. This paper describes the team's working processes, its artistic choice of video as a tool, and the nature of the team's online collaboration, as necessitated by the pandemic.

Why Video?

In deciding how to best deliver international students' perspectives to faculty audiences, the team chose video—a modality which communicates its contents through picture, animation, sound, music and voice, as well as "just text." For some time now, teachers in both ESL and composition/rhetoric have incorporated multimodal forms into their teaching (Hafner, 2014; Johnson & Arola, 2016; Lauer, 2002; Laverick, 2012; Stille & Prasad, 2015; Takayoshi & Ittersum, 2018; Wyosocki et al., 2019; Yi et al., 2020). Remix projects, as our own first-year writing program names them, can be potent as a form of expression for multilingual learners, especially those for whom English is the second (or third or fourth) language. Multimodality allows such students to make their ideas and experiences visible outside of written text; it creates space for multilingual students to express what they otherwise might not be able to articulate in language. Such a perspective aligns with Canagarajah's (2016) notion that "people [in the communicative process] use all the resources at their disposal … such as objects, gestures, and the body, for meaning-making" (p. 450). Language is only one aspect of the meaning-making process; the multimodal, as Christopher A. Hafner (2015) argued, may permit a greater range of voices than does a "pen-and-paper assignment" (p. 504).

Moreover, as Xiao Tan and Paul Kei Matsuda (2021) asserted, integrating multimodality into first-year writing can enrich *teacher* development as well. Tan and Matsuda argued that despite pedagogical challenges, multimodal projects helped the teachers in their study challenge traditional notions of literacy, as they "sought opportunities for professional development, bridged

teaching and their daily literacy practices, and negotiated with existing policies and dominant discourses" (p. 1199). Not surprisingly, a multimodal project now makes up at least one of the five projects assigned in our regular WRA 101 course, and many teachers integrate multimodal aspects into the others (for example, inviting the students to incorporate visuals into their written texts). In PCW, the emphasis on multimodality is even stronger and, indeed, informs the course learning goals, along with an asset-based view that explicitly centers students' languages and cultures as "sites of inquiry and resources for learning" (Learning Goals, n.d.). As our group came together, drawing on the potential of video for teacher development seemed only natural.

Yet while the team agreed on video as the means to make visible the in- and out-of-classroom challenges that both teachers and students were describing, the original concept involved making videos that would essentially record various professors' approaches, vis-a-vis interviews, to the teaching of multilingual students. Further discussion with the students on the team, though, suggested the limits of that method, because it did not seem able to capture the *students*' perspectives. Over time, and through multiple discussions, the team developed the idea of making videos that would portray the issue at hand from the *students*' side, before turning to possible pedagogical solutions. Yet the team also recognized that it lacked actors who could portray the problem scenarios (the two students involved were not sufficient for the scripts under consideration). So the original group evolved the idea of employing cartoons instead. Its goal was to incorporate multimodality into our own research-teaching project, as a tool for "teaching the teachers," and for making more visible the stories of challenge that our students were describing to us. Thus, through its medium of cartoon video, the team was able to yoke the frustrations expressed by the teachers (as in: "Why won't they understand my lectures?") to the actual experiences of the students, as they described them. The intent was to use the videos to surface the concerns of this latter group (i.e., students) and to make these more visible to the former group (the frustrated teachers). Furthermore, the cartoon (rather than acted) mechanisms deployed by our video-making team lent an intentionally playful (rather than just critical) tone to each video's "lesson," and thus, made each video's often challenging message more palatable to its imagined teacher-viewer. As one of the initial student team members put it, the cartoons were designed so as to "not offend."

In choosing video as a form, the team was also influenced by its understanding of the power of this medium to enhance empathy among observers. Robert Shelton and Elyse D'nn Lovell (2018), for instance, claimed that just watching a 30-minute TedX talk increased empathetic concern and perspective-taking on the part of the viewers (community college students). Daniela Hekiert, Magdalena Igras-Cybulska, and Artur Cybulska (2021) described a

study in which video was used to convey the perspectives of student "outgroups" in responding to a particular scenario; the videos unpacked and explained the students' cultural misunderstandings, so that the video observers could "see" where the students were "coming from." Hee Jun Choi and Minwha Yang (2011) incorporated video as a tool in Korean teacher education and claimed that video was more effective than text in its ability to present authentic situations in problem-based instruction that enhanced empathy on the part of the viewer. Such examples suggest the power of video in engendering empathy in viewers, and its possibilities for teaching about others who differ from ourselves.

According to research by Stephan Schwan and Roland Riempp (2004), interactive dynamic visualizations allow the users to adapt form and content to their individual cognitive skills and needs, but are especially potent if they can be interactive; thus, we have embedded our videos into interactive pedagogy sessions for teachers, so that audience members have ample opportunity to engage with the material and to reflect on their viewing experience. Even on the university Teaching Commons website (iteach.msu.edu), we intentionally placed the videos within a larger context of activities: what we call pre-flective questions that set up the problem that each video shows and post-reflective questions that give the teacher-learner the opportunity to try out and think through the implications of what they have learned, in terms of their own pedagogy. Logan Fiorella et al. (2020) argued that when learning from narrated video lessons with complex diagrams, students benefit most from viewing dynamically generated drawings and then verbally explaining what they have learned. The videos provide something similar for our faculty audiences—whether these participants engage asynchronously in the online version in iteach.msu.edu or synchronously through one of our faculty workshops—because the pedagogy workshops in which they are set give faculty participants the opportunity to discuss the ideas being suggested. The audiences not only receive the suggestions and tips listed by text (part 2 of the video), but they also bring away the whole concept and understanding of the problem from the storytelling section (part 1). Thus, vis-à-vis story, the videos create empathy first, and then cognitively engage the viewer in considering solutions to the scenarios thus presented.

Overall then, and in our view, video has been a highly effective tool to communicate the international student perspective and to immerse the audience in a specific student's plight. Our team believes that while watching the video, the professor-audience can visualize and connect with another side of the classroom—the side of the international student that they might not otherwise be aware of—and they can thus better understand answers to the question "Why won't they…?" Thus, we see this project itself as an example

of digital activism, as it gives voice to its student participants. From the start, the project has engaged multilingual students in naming and describing their own learning challenges at our institution; once agreed upon by the team, each problem is then researched and discussed, as the team collaboratively begins to brainstorm and whiteboard a working script, along with illustrations. Two of our student members tend to do more of the research and writing; the other two are more visually inclined, and propose, often through drawings, the images that end up in the video. The teachers contribute the most at each video's end, as they help suggest pedagogical solutions to the issues thus raised.

How Video

In its three or so years of existence, the team has faced (and resolved) numerous challenges: the leave-taking of key members (some of whom graduated or took jobs elsewhere) and the seeking of funds (which then had to be strategically managed, stretched, or renewed, to accommodate project needs). But perhaps its biggest challenge was the pandemic, which necessitated virtual collaboration. No sooner had the group effectively reconstituted itself with new members had then the pandemic struck. Whereas our former meetings (and the opportunities to collectively brainstorm, whiteboard, and transform our discussion of pedagogical challenges into video format) had taken place in-person, the next two years involved online "gatherings" at odd hours of the day and night (e.g., 9 PM and on weekends), especially designed to accommodate the schedules of our student collaborators who were participating from as far as 12 time zones away. Following the co-created scripts, the student and professor team members asynchronously would record their oral contributions to the video and then upload these to the course site we had created in D2L, our institution's learning management system. When "outside" voices were needed—for instance, the voices of the U.S. professor and the U.S. student in video 2—other writing colleagues and even family members were recruited. Meanwhile, one of the Thai students, Plagrim (Apichaya), who was especially adept at drawing, would post her cartoon illustrations in D2L, so that in turn Claudia, our Indonesian team member with video expertise, could piece together the sound recordings and cartoon images to make the videos. The team also used both D2L and Google folders to house multiple other activities related to the project: the various iterations of brainstorming and scriptwriting; notes on the related scholarly articles (which team members took turns reading and summarizing); and PowerPoint drafts for each of the virtual presentations and workshops that the team gave. In this way, the project became a story of video-making over wide distances, of international collaboration across continents.

Overall, the team members have been fiercely collaborative—so much so that it is now sometimes hard to tell where one individual's contribution ends and another's begins. In fact, each of the challenges the team has faced—whether that be locating a new teammate with specific skills, or engaging in new research (most recently, in the specific challenges international students face in online classes—our next video's topic) is resolved *by* the team itself, through its bi-weekly problem-solving and brainstorming sessions. Scripts, articles, and meeting notes tend to be co-written, with all members typing into a shared Google doc. Perhaps most significantly, though, the majority of meetings are run by the students themselves, who tend to rotate the role of facilitator, so that all may lead. When we returned to being in-person, the team discussed at length the problem of how to afford attendance at the Computers and Writing 2022 conference, ultimately deciding that only one professor and two of the four students could attend in-person, while the other professor and the remaining two students would participate virtually. Interestingly enough, though, the team recently reversed this money-saving strategy, when it voted to raise the student hourly reimbursements from $10 to $15 an hour, rightly arguing that the recent acceptance of a related scholarly article in *Young Scholars in Writing* constituted evidence of the students' enhanced research and writing skills that warranted better pay.

Conclusion

As constituted, the three videos now live in the world, and in fact, have taken on lives of their own. The students have presented their work, including the videos, at MSU's Learning Abroad Conference, Diversity Research Showcase (where they won an award), Social Justice Art Festival, and two Undergraduate Research and Arts Fora (where they also received an award). The postings on YouTube and the Iteach.msu.edu web site allow for ongoing asynchronous viewing and reflection by faculty both on- and off-campus. Synchronously, the videos are now integrated into virtual and in-person training with new teachers in MSU's writing and ESL programs. The team's two current faculty members, along with the students as their course schedules permit, have shared the videos in regional and national conferences (e.g., Accessible Learning and THAT camp-MSU, the Michigan College English Association and the Minnesota Writing and English, and most recently, Computers and Writing). In each case, audience members have indicated that they find the videos—along with the accompanying comments of our student team who participates as much as possible—to be both illuminating and instructive. While we have yet to record and code audience responses in a systematic way (that is another step for the team in its future), we postulate that the videos

are particularly effective because they demonstrate, and in the least offensive way possible, the classroom from the *students'* perspectives—thus surfacing ecologies and responses that might not otherwise be visible. In this regard, the contributions of the stellar student members of our team have been invaluable. Overall, our project demonstrates what can happen when we not only listen to, but foreground, the voices and experiences of our multilingual, international students. Scholars have tended to do this in the past vis-a-vis data gathered from the students (for instance, through surveys, focus groups, and interviews), and then report out their findings in academic journals. Our move is to incorporate video as well, which has the capacity to reach a broader audience, and with more immediate and powerful effect.

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