

## **Pedagogue Bonus: Equitable Writing Placement (w/Charissa Che)**

### *Transcript*

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, I talk with Charissa Che about race, language, and equitable writing placement.

Charissa Che is an Assistant Professor of English at Queensborough Community College (CUNY). Her teaching and scholarship centers on cultural rhetorics, translanguaging, and second language writing pedagogy. In particular, she investigates how Asians and Asian Americans navigate institutional spaces in their language and identity practices in ways that are resistive, agentic, and community-building.

Charissa, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You've been doing research on issues of racial/linguistic bias in assessment and college writing placement, and the general difficulties that lie in equitable first-year writing placement, particularly for L2 students. This research will be published in a forthcoming edited collection called Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: Case Studies of Postsecondary Education in Transition. Your chapter is called "Mind the (Linguistic) Gap: On 'Flagging' ESL Students at a New York City Community College." I was hoping we could spend some time talking about equitable writing placement. Maybe you could talk about what students are most affected by standard writing placement practices and finally, how teachers, administrators, and programs might go about designing more equitable placement practices.*

CC: Language and race cannot be separated. I think that those of us in rhetoric and composition know that, but language is deeply embedded in ideologies of power. There is no language that stands all by itself without being informed by power and culture and race. When we talk about standard English ideology, which is the thing that appears in standardized exams for placement, standardized English is deeply embedded in whiteness, in this idea that there is a prestige way of speaking English, which is indicative of being educated.

That is ideological. It's a construct. But if we keep enacting these standardized exams, it perpetuates the idea that this is actually the case. That it's a fact. There is this linkage between standard language ideology and racial hegemony—that there is this ideal native speaker of English that looks a certain way. That languages can be in hierarchies. That Englishes can be hierarchized based on accents and variations of English and teacher identities and racialization and also just how we approach teaching and assessment.

Thinking about how race plays a role in all of those ways that we use language to teach our students and to place our students. We need to be more, I think, mindful of that and maybe even

let our students know about the power dynamics at play. I think because that's so key in students not internalizing this belief that if they have accented English or if they don't have this perfect standard English grammar, that they are somehow deficient and need to erase whatever cultural richness has informed their linguistic differences so that they can fit in and succeed and see more intelligent.

I think we talk about it a lot and we're talking about it more when it comes to pedagogy, but maybe not so much with assessment. It makes sense because I think that trying to come up with a holistic way to assess our students is kind of a perennial struggle. How do we do that efficiently and cost effectively, yet also fairly, considering these aspects of a student's background? It's not enough to look at a student's linguistic background, what languages they speak. It's not enough obviously just to consider their race or their ethnicity, because a lot of students who might be seen or flagged as needing that supplemental writing instruction, they may not actually need it. But because they lived in another country or because they are multilingual, it might be seen that they are "ESL," when in fact maybe they might have some skills because they have had a different kind of language instruction that we can learn from and pass on to our L1 students.

In terms of the students that are most affected, I would think it's students of color. Where I teach, I think as part of the City University of New York or CUNY, and it mostly serves first generation college students. For me, I teach at a community college and community colleges, generally, mostly first gen, a lot of multilingual students returning students, non-traditional students. I think the diversity within the community college can be a complicated and difficult to account for in placement, but that's what makes it like a really interesting locus for studying placement. I feel like the stakes are especially high at community colleges.

I feel like if we can iron things out there, that could be a model for four-year colleges. Standardized exams when it's at the community college, I think that it runs the risk of excluding a lot of students, because inevitably we want to place them in a place where that matches their competency and does not give them maybe extraneous instruction and also doesn't disregard the supplemental English instruction that they need. How do we begin to assess these students? How do we begin to determine what test they need to take, what path to set them on in the placement process? I think a huge barrier...I study second language writing pedagogy, as like a more specific avenue of rhetoric. But I think especially in an urban college setting like CUNY, it's not enough to think of a student as "ESL" if they're international or if they learn another language than English as their first language. These are just really small pieces of the puzzle.

I can't say that I have like a solution for assessment. I think that it's just important to acknowledge that it's complicated and that standardized assessments should probably be considered alongside more holistic ways to think of a student as individuals when we are designing these placement practices. I think we need to expand the way we think about ESL students. I think it's a contested term and I recognize ESL as a term is problematic because it kind of...in the literature around ESL, it implies that English is not "their natural language" or it sets up a hierarchy.

But I use that term maybe because it's uncomfortable to kind of expand what that could mean, especially in a university system where students come from all over the place and have all sorts of diverse backgrounds and their languages are colored by their movement across places and spaces and life experiences. I think when it comes to how we can see some reform, I don't have a hard and fast answer for assessments.

But in my research for this article that is coming out on placement at two-year colleges, I interviewed some faculty in the English department at QCC just to see what they thought of the current placement process and how they have tried to navigate that in their classrooms given the barriers that are faced in placement. This conversation around directed self-placement is already everywhere, especially with two-year colleges. And of course, that with its own complications. A student might be hesitant to say that they need that extra help, let alone identify as ESL given the stigma that surrounds it. But a lot of my colleagues suggested that students can reflect on their experiences with reading and writing, their educational backgrounds, the ESLD, which is the ESL Diagnostic, was developed during the pandemic to place those who were flagged as ESL. It replaced a standardized exam that had to be taken in person.

It was created for efficiency's sake mostly, but there was a part that a lot of faculty found to be really informative because there was a section where they had to respond to a reading, but then the second part is where they get to reflect on the difficulty level that they faced in that writing assignment and the types of help that they think they could use. It was practical, and I think it gives students some credit on how aware they are of their abilities and identities as writers. I think we need to like talk to the students firsthand in designing these new practices.

I think also directed self-placement is a good idea because test taking skills do not equal writing skills. Just because you are able to pass a standardized exam doesn't mean that you are automatically equipped to write and read critically in the college classroom. I think we need to do away with those assumptions that they're inextricably linked. Other faculty have suggested giving surveys at the beginning of their semesters to students to reflect on their language backgrounds, but also what topics they'd be interested in studying, what assignments they'd be interested in doing, what readings they would like to read.

Faculty have collaborated with their students on designing assignments and, more explicitly, explained to students what the placement process looks like, especially those who are not fluent in English to maybe have someone translate to them in their first language, "This is what you're about to take," just so they know, just so they don't have hesitance to get that extra instruction if they actually need it.