

Episode 53: Suresh Canagarajah

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode I talk with Suresh Canagarajah about second language writing, transnationalism, translanguaging, and using literacy autobiographies in the writing classroom.

Suresh is an absolutely wonderful person to talk to, incredibly intelligent, and I'm thankful that he decided to be on the podcast

Suresh Canagarajah is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English, Applied Linguistics, and Asian Studies at Pennsylvania State University. He teaches courses in rhet/comp for the English Department, and in sociolinguistics for the Applied Linguistics Department. Suresh comes from the Tamil-speaking northern region of Sri Lanka. He taught earlier in the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. His recent book *Transnational Literacy Autobiographies as Translingual Writing* (Routledge, 2020) combines the narrative writing of students in his courses and his own narrative on developing his teaching and writing through these classroom interactions. Suresh also serves in the Pennsylvania Governor's State Law Enforcement Advisory Commission.

Suresh, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by drawing on your expertise and knowledge in second language writing scholarship. So what are some current issues being addressed in second language writing scholarship, or what kinds of conversations are ongoing about teaching second language writers?

SC: So, I think all of us in second language writing initially started with the assumption that second language writers are new to English and therefore we have to focus a lot on grammar and language norms. So actually there are some scholars, we are good friends, Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson, they wrote a paper in the early nineties, and they call it *The Different Cultures of Writing Studies* (see "Cultures of Writing: An Ethnographic Comparison"). They said in L1, the teachers focus on voice and critical thinking and identity, and all those nice things. But in L2, they were looking at two departments in the same university, and they said in the department that teaches L2 writing, they focus only on grammar. They don't talk about voice and critical thinking because they think students still need to learn the grammar before they can engage with that.

I think a lot of changes, now, relate to going beyond just grammar. So we feel, sort of one of the first shifts that I wanted to mention to you is treating writing as rhetorical, even second language writing as rhetorical. And one of my good friends, Jay Jordan, he has been writing a lot about that recently, why don't we teach second language writing as just rhetoric than just making a grammatically perfect text? So, that's one of the major shifts, treating second language writing as rhetorical. This also comes into issues of the voice of a multilingual writer, identity, and even creativity. And I guess we were earlier very norm driven. We were very concerned about getting the writers to learn the academic norms and grammatical norms. But writing as rhetorical and

second language writing as rhetorical, they're kind of thinking more about where can students appropriate the grammar or use English for their own voices and identities in more creative ways. So that's one shift.

The second shift, also moving away from language and grammar, is multimodality. So we are saying writing involves a lot of other resources. Even in academic writing, we haven't really been sensitive to things like space, paragraph divisions, font. Writing as a practice involves technology, board processing systems, computers, but even more broadly academic writing draws from conversations we have. Students have social media posts. So, if I use multimodality in a broad sense to include all these practices, communicative practices that lead to the final text, a lot of us are now working on how all these other multimodal resources help writing. So that's the second shift.

And a third shift deriving from all of that is let's call it "translingualism," that is, how do students go beyond the grammar of one language in their writing? So this gets people scared because they would say, "Well, English writing is English writing. You'll get punished if you bring a little bit of Chinese or a little bit of Arabic into your writing." That's true, but to begin with in the process of writing as people construct the text, we don't know what's going through their mind. They might be multitasking in multiple languages as they create the text. They might be writing a first draft in Arabic just to get the ideas going. They might try to outline in Arabic and then the final draft. So I think there's nothing to worry about in the sense...students are not going to suffer if we allow all the other languages to be part of the writing process.

My funny way of putting it to a lot of my students is to say, translanguaging might actually help your students write a more perfectly grammatical English essay. It's a paradox, but I think it's true in the sense that if somebody is just shuttling between different languages, they also develop a keen awareness of English grammar. In the sense that they ask...like for me, I'm a secondary speaker, I use Tamil all the time. I'm always thinking to myself, "Why do we say this in English *this* way? When we say that in Tamil in *that* way?" I tell my students I'm always learning because I'm a multilingual, I'm always asking questions about languages and hopefully it's leading to a better appreciation of both grammars. So I think there's a fear from teachers that allowing multiple languages into the writing classroom or writing might affect the proficiency of English writing because students, I actually like to put it in a very paradoxical way, can actually improve the proficiency because moving between languages can create a better language awareness, metalinguistic awareness, to rise above both grammars.

SW: Your latest book Transnational Literacy Autobiographies as Translingual Writing brings together transnationalism and translingualism. How do you see the connections between both for writing studies?

SC: Formerly when we focused a lot on English grammar, we thought of English as belonging to one country or one community, the native speakers of the country: U.S., UK. And then, we also thought that students who come to our universities want to acculturate to American norms. Therefore, we felt it was justified to teach American English and the English norms. But a couple of things have happened because of globalization and migration and things like that. One is a lot of people feel English is now a transnational language. To use something in cultural studies, it's

“deterritorialized,” it doesn't have one territory. Earlier, we taught, you know, English belongs to the territory of native speaker countries, like UK and USA.

So people are taking away English students who come from India and Nigeria, the Caribbean islands. They come with their own English. We sometimes mistakenly think they don't know the language, but they have had a history of more than 200 years of using English. So English is becoming transnational. And then...our students are also more comfortable with transnational identities. That is, we feel, even when we come for studies or work in the United States, that doesn't mean we lose national identities. We enjoy identities that belong to multiple communities. On top of that, even American students, Anglo-American students, can't be thought of as American anymore. They're also transnational.

So in my classes, and in that book, I have the writing of couple of Anglo-Americans students who went on study abroad to other countries or had a short-term teaching stint as English teachers in South Korea, France, and places like that. What I find is a lot of students in our classes are now positioning themselves as transnationals. I call it positioning themselves because they might have legal nationality somewhere, but that doesn't affect the identity positioning you might have. That is, some people would like to think of themselves and identify themselves as not belonging to one language group or one country. So becoming more sensitive to transnational identities. The question then is, so what implications would this have for writing? Would people write differently if they think of themselves as transnational?

So here I borrow from an earlier book by a Berkeley Professor in German, Claire Kramsch. It's an Oxford University Press Publication in 2009 titled simply, *The Multilingual Subject*. She didn't use the word “translingualism,” but what she says is very similar to translingualism, she asks students in her classes, Berkeley undergraduates, to write their narratives. Just a short one-page narrative about becoming bilingual or coming to United States to learn in U.S. universities. And what she said is, even without telling it to them, she developed multilingual texts. That is, they would start in English, but they would throw in something from their own languages or other varieties of English. So she eventually theorized this for people who don't have a very rigid sense of home, they are trying to find new textual homes. The essay becomes a place to resolve their identity conflicts and language conflicts. So she said these narratives, these personal narratives, help them develop an identity that puts together their transnational identities. “Where do I belong?”

It's just a kind of ongoing question for everybody and they find a tentative resolution in the text. I thought, “Hey, that's a great idea.” I was also finding them in my essays, in autobiographies in my classes. But I said...I used the term “translingual” because what I find is by using the term translingual, what I then mean is people are going beyond the labels of languages. So “trans-,” as in rising above labels of languages or monolithic understandings of language. That is, English means there is no place in it for other languages, Arabic, Chinese, etc. One of the funny things I tell my students is, “Do you guys know that English already has hundreds of languages that it appropriates?” It's one of the most mixed languages that you can find. I actually call English a Creole language. It's like a Creole, it's mixed with so many languages. English is a translingual language.

But I found in my classes, students, first of all, international students, were clearly translingual, but also Anglo-American students in some of my classes where the students are mixed, who because of their experiences in globalization migration, etc., who could also gradually think of themselves as transnational. Their writing becomes kind of performative in the sense...they are writing about how they are navigating multiple identities, multiple languages, and then they actually, in this essay, perform that identity. So what I wanted to show was translingual and creative writing is not always to sound cool or to show off, but it's driven by certain serious psychological, cultural, and social conflicts people might experience and are seeking ways to resolve them.

SW: Your pedagogy features the writing of literacy autobiographies. What value do you see in this genre for multilingual students?

SC: So this comes from Vygotsky's idea that engaging with inactivity by using certain tools helps you develop your identity, internalize your learning. So learning always is in the context of activity and tools. So we think of writing a narrative as a tool, as an activity that mediates your development or identity in your learning of language. It's pretty widespread, you know, it's not just writing teachers who seem to be using it. Some of my colleagues who have nothing to do with writing, they actually get their future teachers to write their narrative. What I did was, following some of their practice to some degree...for the courses I've been teaching lately, which is called "Teaching Second Language Writing," it's for training future teachers who are becoming teachers of writing, and it's a mix of undergraduates and early graduate students. So what I did was I told them we are going to do a lot of the readings, and I use a lot scholars from second language writing like Dana Ferris. She has a wonderful handbook for composition and for teaching composition. So I use that, Christine Pearson Casanave, she's a second language scholar also. So on top of that, I said, you will also write your own literacy autobiography throughout the 15 weeks, starting from a very basic outline. And you'll negotiate, that is, as you post your drafts, we will talk about it as a class, to see how to improve it.

So a lot of different things are happening. One is they are engaging with their reading from the point of view of their own identities and their own backgrounds. Secondly, because it's kind of developed through the whole semester, they are also practicing what they should be teaching, which is draft several drafts and outlines, and get feedback, including my feedback. I found that they are, I'm sure you could do it with any genre, all these things, even with expository writing, but with the literacy autobiography what I saw was that it's personal, it gives you a space to think about your own learning and your own background, all the languages that you speak, or the learning that you did. I tell my students, you are also assessing your own learning of writing so when your future teachers, you can learn what didn't work and what did work. So it's an important lesson for you also to kind of think critically about your own learning of writing. Maybe if I put it in one word, it's a very performative genre.

SW: Suresh, how do you respond to critics who would argue that this creative genre—literacy autobiographies—has little relevance for the high stakes writing in academic contexts, or the kinds of writing people expect to see across the university?

SC: Yeah, that's a great question. Every time I try to publish on these things, that's what reviewers ask. So how is this going to prepare students in good writing, or teach good writing? So what I would say is, first of all, I think this partly goes into the question of transferability in writing. I know that's a hot topic. My position is that nothing is transferable as a product or as the genre. For example, in my classroom, if I teach them research writing, we all do, that's not the same research writing you will do in your course in biology or physics or economics. It's a pedagogical genre in the sense we teach certain important things, but that genre itself cannot be transported to another class.

I would say, even from one class to another or one instructor to another, the genre conventions might vary in the sense that research article I teach in my English basic writing course will probably be different from what another professor teaches. For example, I might have more space for voice, even in a research article and somebody might have, for various pedagogical reasons, might say, "No, you have to be cautious. Don't. Just stick to the safe routines." So one issue is that if the concern is about how can we transport this genre to other academic contexts, I would say, "No, we can't. That's not the idea."

So, what I would like to see through the writing of this genre...I call them language awareness. How does language work in writing? Secondly, I call them socio-linguistics strategies. Somebody may call it negotiation strategies. That is, how do I negotiate the norms in order to bring a little bit of myself into these norms? So how do I negotiate with audiences who come with different norms to write creatively? So second is negotiation strategies. And third, I call rhetorical sensitivity, or sometimes I've used rhetorical sensibility. Writing in multiple places, I forget my words, I guess. But those are the three things, language awareness, negotiation strategies, and rhetorical sensitivity. So by rhetorical sensitivity, I say, you're not going to practice the same rhetorical features or modes in every writing, but you develop a kind of eye for what works in different contexts or what's permissible in different contexts. Also, issues like what's effective, what's not; what is appreciated, what is not appreciated; what is understood, what is not understood.

I like students to take a step back from the text to look at all these subjective dimensions. Collectively, I call them dispositions. All three of them. So rather than the text and norms and rules, I focus on developing the dispositions that will help them for future writing. But I say it's because genres cannot be transported and you're going to face new conditions, new genres all the time, every class you go to...these dispositions will help you deal with the new context. That is, if I made you dependent on one set of norms or one set of rhetorical features, you will be tied to that, and it's not going to help you. So at a broader level, I also think about issues like globalization, migration, digital technology, social media. They all involve a lot of contexts of unpredictability. I tell my students, "So rather than teaching you one genre at a time or one text at a time or one language norm, let me focus on the dispositions that you can then apply to other contexts."

SW: What are some resources that you would recommend teachers consider when teaching second language writers? And why would you suggest those resources, or what advantages and affordances do they provide teachers and students?

SC: Let me start with explanation because I guess the resources and affordances won't make sense without some justification. I think I'm coming from my background in social linguistics and migration studies and things like that. I feel that teaching has become more challenging for us because we are always confronted by new situations, new genres, and new interlocutors and audiences. Our texts travel to so many places. So teaching in a product oriented way, that's a very familiar term for all of us, and also teacher-fronted way, that is, me taking the authority and telling the students these are the norms you need to learn, or this is the genre convention, and if you just learn the genre convention you are going to be fine, is not going to help. Because students are always going to be confronted with new situations.

What I like to do in my classes is treat the classroom as a contact zone, like Mary Louise Pratt used in 1991. A class is a safe space where multiple cultures, multiple languages can collide, and a lot of times embodied by the students we have. Make all that diversity shine through in my class. So I'm kind of smiling to myself because a lot of people sometimes say, "How do you introduce diversity in your writing?" I say, "I just provide a space for it so that it comes out and I invite it rather than just teach it."

I create a classroom where, as a contact zone, multiple languages and cultures can thrive. Or another term that I've used in some places is the learning environment as ecological. Ecological meaning all the resources in the classroom setting would become functional and influential and generative because every classroom has a lot of resources. The way class chairs are arranged, the other texts in the classroom that we are dealing with, so sometimes we have to carefully choose the texts. To go back to an example I gave you, I don't give texts that are only translingual. So sometimes I use my readings, but I also pair it with other second language writers who would make a case for norms in writing. Because I want students to kind of work between these positions to see how would you formulate your own texts in the context of these persons? Ecological would be to let all the affordances try different kinds of texts, different kinds of technologies.

Basically, this also means that students are free to choose their affordances and resources. I found some students do their own reference reading for the literacy biography and then use it as a sounding board for their own literacy biography. But I found...yeah, that's interesting because they are not sticking to my reading list and prescribed textbooks and such, they are actually seeking out their own texts. And then another student who reads that will find out, "Maybe I should read that, too." So broadly speaking I like to treat classrooms as a contact zone of diverse influences, diverse cultures, diverse languages, and then treat all of them as ecological in the sense that they can all generate good learning and good texts.

But here's where the negotiation comes in, the negotiation strategy. It all depends eventually on how students and I agree to negotiate all these for good outcomes, productive outcomes. And they are negotiated differently. Like one student will negotiate them to write a fairly safe and normative kind of essay. I tell myself that's their investment in writing. This is where they want to go. And I need to...I can't complain about that. I can't come with that predefined notion of good writing or whatever, all that I can expect is, how does this suit your intentions and expectations for your writing and how well does it suit your expectations for writing. And the classroom, with these multiple affordances and resources, can help that kind of student as much

as a very creative, international student who might want to do something different. So in short, this is the way I think about resources and affordances in my teaching.

SW: Thanks, Suresh. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.