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Rethinking EAP Students—Communal Take on Mistakes

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English for Academic Purposes (EAP, henceforth) at UW-Milwaukee offers ranges of courses for these students for whom English is not the first/only language/dialect. EAP students come from different language and cultural backgrounds and gather as one community with one purpose—to get better at English. However, [#uwm812](#) exposes us to readings that challenges our long-held beliefs regarding this community, especially with regards to student errors/mistakes. Especially thinking about the early readings, for example Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations* raised intriguing questions student errors produced by Basic Writers (BW). Also, Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* also highlights the debate surrounding standard vs non-standard English that gets to the very definition of what should be considered *standard* English. Both Shaughnessy and Delpit discuss student community who has multilingual and multidialectal language background—something Vershawn Ashanti Young and Suresh Canagarajah also underline in their works.

Bem-vindo BIENVENUE ようこそ WELCOME Välkommen
WELKOM Willkommen Bienvenida 欢迎 Velkommen

EAP students' *mistakes* can be open for interpretation, or better yet, up for debate depending on who is looking at it or from what angle. EAP teachers from a pure linguistic point of view may see a rather non-standard language form as a mistake while a first-year writing instructor may see it from a rather rhetorical vantage point. Just thinking about the word “mistake” itself, the question is who is missing the take (pun intended) on the apparent student error? Suresh Canagarajah's piece “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued” that we read gives a good example for this complex issue. Canagarajah examines the Chinese student's “peculiar” use of “can able to” in the same sentence as that makes sense in the student's first language. However, judging solely from prescriptive grammatical rules of standard English, “can able to” is an error of redundancy since “can” and “be able to” has interchangeable meaning in English.

Now this can be ruled out just as a discreet and individual example. However, my personal experience teaching EAP students at UWM resonates with Canagarajah's example. During my tenure at UWM EAP, one of my Saudi students pronounced the word “people” as “beoble”. Another student with Arabic language background would pronounce the word usually (with P sound) but write “beoble” when he would write it on paper. Now because of my familiarity with Arabic language, I know Arabic does not really have “p” sound in it. So, these apparent *mistakes* were rather transfer from their first/other language. Therefore, this community of students who are dynamic in their linguistic repertoire, may produce language forms that is apparently erroneous, but actually stem from their meta-linguistic abilities. Students with more than one language may make *apparent* mistake that is open for such interpretation. When EAP students make these apparent mistakes, there may be more than just grammatical errors that is happening there.

I am using the word “apparent” here because on face value they may seem like a mistake however, upon deeper reflection, and also possible active negotiation with students these

mistakes may come out as another form of language. I am echoing Canagarajah here, "To meet these objectives, rather than focusing on correctness, we should perceive "error" as the learner's active negotiation and exploration of choices and possibilities." (593). However, does this mean a student never make mistakes or every mistake is some sort of meta-linguistic activity? I do not have a definitive answer to this question. It is complicated to say the least, and students do make mistakes.

So, how do we approach this student community in terms of assessing them? One way to go about it, is to talk with the student in person to find out what he/she was thinking while s/he was *linguaging*. Also, important is more coordination between teacher communities too since teachers from different background may look at these *mistakes* differently. For example, looking from a language instructional perspective, mistakes may seem just like mistakes. However, teachers of rhetoric may look at these mistakes from a rhetorical standpoint. I am not saying one is better/more important than the other, on the contrary one (language instruction/teaching) can complement the other (rhetoric). Therefore, as much as we need to think about student communities, we should also think about teacher communities too. Teaching and learning both are communal.