

Article

# A Conversation about “Editing” Plurilingual Scholars’ Thesis Writing

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on our combined experiences providing thesis writing support, we critically consider the tensions surrounding policies and practices aimed at plurilingual graduate students using English as an additional language (EAL). Our trioethnographic methodology allows us to unpack and explore the ethics framing our individual “editing” practices amid institutional norms, expectations and ideologies. Drawing on relevant literature in the field, our conversations or “trialogues” produce insights and raise questions surrounding the ethical imperative of providing effective thesis writing support for plurilingual EAL writers in an era of increasing internationalization. We conclude with suggestions for flexible, targeted writing support that challenges narrow epistemologies and stale ideologies regarding taboo editing practices of academic and language literacy brokers involved in the production and revision of thesis writing.

## **Introduction**

As national and international boundaries become more porous, universities are increasingly sites where the global and local meet; ideas, positions, cultures and languages are negotiated and transformed through the daily interactions of the academy. Institutions of higher education are often spaces where all students, especially those who use and negotiate multiple languages and registers, must find inroads into the preferred varieties of academic English privileged in the academy (Casanave, 2014; Duff, 2010). However,

these same students often confront paradoxical narratives around how to achieve those privileged varieties of academic writing. On one hand, plurilingual students using English as an additional language (henceforth plurilingual EAL writers) are often encouraged to have their writing “tidied up,” while on the other they are often told that line-by-line editing or “fixing” is beyond the purview of traditional academic support and writing centres. These paradoxical discourses surrounding academic writing are the genesis for this necessary but uncomfortable discussion, which grows out of the thesis writing support experiences of three diversely positioned scholars at a top-tier, plurilingual, research-intensive institution. Drawing on extant literature in the fields of applied linguistics, writing studies, and education, our tri-vocalic discussions aim to contribute to the advancement of knowledge by stimulating critical reflection among those who are supporting and adjudicating thesis writing across higher educational contexts.

### The University of Toronto

The University of Toronto boasts a student population that includes a large number of international students (approximately one in five) as well as a high proportion of students from the Greater Toronto Area, one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse areas in Canada. Thus, the University of Toronto can be characterized as a plurilingual environment where most of the students know and use more than one language (University of Toronto, 2016). Perhaps owing to its size and diversity, the University of Toronto has a robust and well-regarded support network for student writers with 14 diversely named writing, success, and support centres across campus (McIntosh, 2016; Paré, 2017). These spaces almost unanimously describe editing and/or proofreading as beyond the parameters of their services.

### The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), the Education faculty of the University of Toronto, the writing support for their more than 3,000 graduate students is largely provided by the OISE Student Success Centre (OSSC). The OSSC is staffed mostly by doctoral students who are responsible for providing academic (writing) support to graduate students from across the four OISE departments<sup>1</sup>. One of the main areas of writing support provided is to thesis-writing students doing MA or PhD degrees. This writing support is supplementary to that provided by the student’s thesis supervisor.

## Stances on “Editing”

While writing support can be broadly defined and may touch on a number of facets of the writing process, we focus our discussion here on the provision of “editing.” From the outset, we acknowledge that editing is not a singular activity and may include several diverse processes and approaches with varying levels of engagement by the “editor.” Indeed, the Editor’s Association of Canada (n.d.) delineates 12 types of editing, four of which are directly pertinent to the work of those providing thesis-writing support. First, “substantive or structural editing” occurs when the editing focuses on topics, ideas, audience, and conventions. Second, “stylistic editing” occurs when meaning is discussed and negotiated. Third, “copy editing” occurs when addressing sentence level grammar, punctuation and spelling errors. Finally, “rewriting”—a much-admonished practice among those charged with the provision of writing support in higher education, and a source of tension among the authors—occurs when the editor revises the text unilaterally and without consultation.

It is this final definition of editing, “rewriting,” that is often the cause of consternation at writing centres. While many individual centres firmly eschew editing or “fixing” in explicit terms (see for example, McIntosh, 2016), other centres and associations (e.g. CASDW; IWCA) use terms such as “instructional” and “collaborative” rather than “editing” to describe work undertaken by writing support staff (Graves, 2016; “Starting a Writing Centre”, 2017). Indeed, surveys of writing/support/success centre mandates across contexts demonstrate that the edict against editing has been widespread and consistent over time, well beyond the confines of the University of Toronto (Babcock, 2008; Harris 2010; McIntosh, 2016). Indeed, even though many writing centres fail to clearly define editing within the parameters discussed above, the moratorium on editing remains so firmly entrenched in writing centres that those who work in centres often define their work as entailing the absence of editing (McIntosh, 2016). Where editing is defined (and disallowed), it often includes revisions, corrections or changes to texts done on the part of an “editor.” While “not editing” does not amount to a refusal to provide sentence-level support to students navigating the complex linguistic and discursive norms of the academy, an instructional approach to the provision of such support is generally emphasized by writing centres ostensibly concerned with academic integrity and not “writing students’ papers for them” (North, 1984, p. 441).

In this article, we attempt to frankly discuss the editing practices we have employed in the service of supporting our plurilingual EAL students in our roles as academic (e.g. supervisor) and language (e.g. writing support specialist) literacy brokers (Lillis & Curry, 2010). While we highlight the experiences of

plurilingual EAL writers, the provision of support with language, discourses and the expectations of culturally-influenced and discipline-specific learning environments has, we argue, the propensity to support the learning journeys of all students. We also discuss the policies of institutional spaces, diversely named writing/support/success centres, that may be well-positioned to provide editing support despite their reticence to do so. While we acknowledge that stand-alone spaces for literacy instruction in higher education may be diversely named as “Skills Centres,” “Success Centres,” and “Learning Centres” we often default to the recognizable space of “Writing Centres” wherein historical and lingering edicts of not editing often continue to circulate, even as nomenclature changes.

In the next sections, we describe the various ways our professional journeys have intersected, explain our methodology, and present discussions related to the most salient aspects of our work with thesis-track students. Our discussion and conclusions aims to both clarify our transformed understandings as well as raise potentially uncomfortable, but crucial questions regarding ethical and professional tensions surrounding the provision of academic writing support for plurilingual EAL graduate students. Ultimately, we do not aim to provide simple solutions but rather to advance knowledge in the field by stimulating explicit debate about the ethics of thesis writing support across educational contexts.

## **Methodology: Duo/Trioethnography**

As trioethnographers, it is important for us to introduce the many ways we have worked together and how our paths have crossed. We have worked together in various capacities including as writing centre advisors, co-researchers, co-authors as well as within a supervisor/student relationship (see Figure 1).

Duo/trio ethnography, a relatively new research genre, is embedded in the research traditions of storytelling and William Pinar’s (1975) concept of “currere.” It allows for the critical juxtaposition of two or three voices of people who experience the same phenomenon while recognizing the influence of their own *currere*, or curriculum of life conceptualized as one’s history. In trioethnography, three individuals explore their respective *currere* in conversation, a dialogic approach to meaning construction, which includes theses and antitheses (Norris, 2008).

In duo/trioethnographies, two or three researchers work in tandem to critique and question the meanings they give to social issues and epistemological constructs. Working with a critical partner (or in this case, partners), researchers engage in cycles of interpretation to unravel new perspectives and insights (Sawyer & Norris 2015). This makes the authors of the duo/trioethnography both the researchers as well as the researched. Moreover, it makes the storytelling a form of data collection and the discussion a type of

analysis as well as an integral part of the writing process rather than discrete phases of the research process. Storytelling enables the researchers to recall past events and reinterpret experience. The dialogic element and the act of self-interrogation invites the readers to get involved in the conversation (Norris 2008).

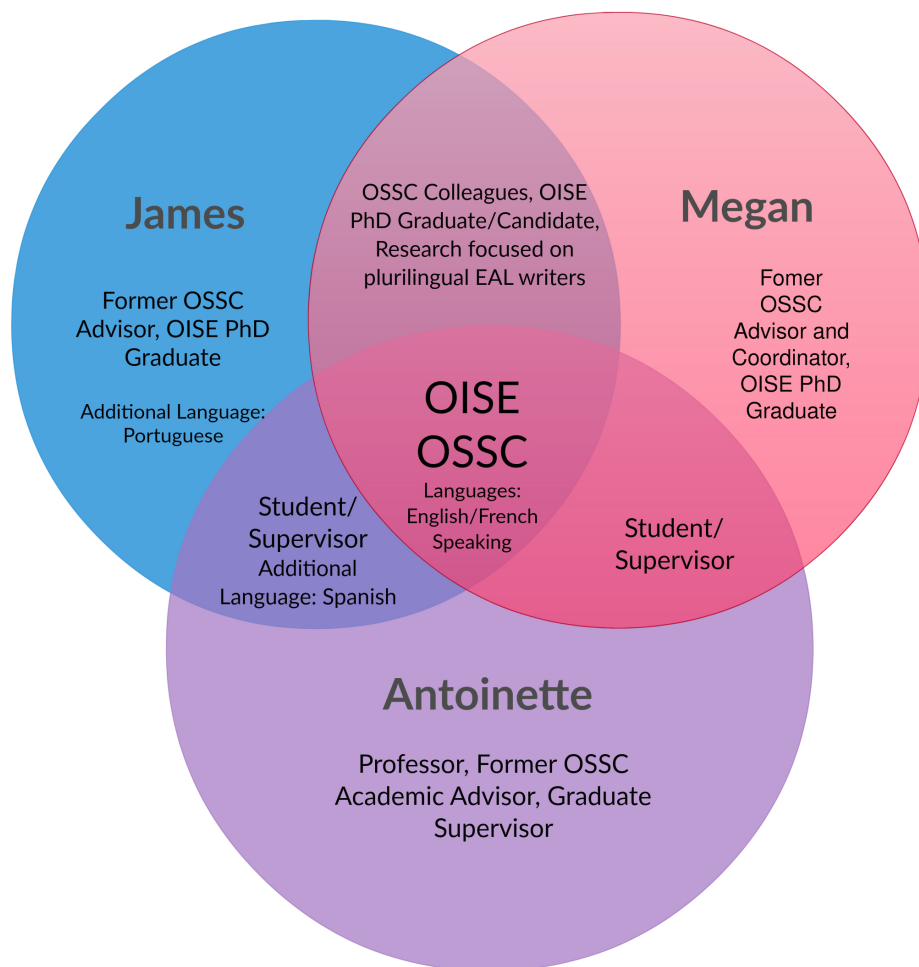


Figure 1. Our Intersections

Juxtaposing views allow the duo/trio ethnographers to discover and explore overlapping perspectives that create “hybrid identities” (Asher, 2007) instead of binary opposites (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). While some duo/trioethnographers attempt to gain critical awareness of their own experiences through a dialogic process, thereby leading to a changed perspective, others use duo/trioethnographies to critique or

deconstruct dominant discourses or to complicate cultural meanings through a dialogic collaborative lens. We have been inspired by the transformative nature of trioethnography in exploring our beliefs and experiences related to academic writing support for plurilingual graduate students. Other researchers (e.g. Diaz & Grain, 2016) describe how duoethnography has been a mechanism for forging connections in academia while Rinehart and Earl (2016) explain how auto, duo and collaborative ethnographies have allowed for the infusion of caring in spite of an overarching audit culture in education. In addition, Norris and Sawyer (2017) promote the value of duoethnography to the study of interdisciplinary practice, as illustrated by researchers and practitioners from the field of education including higher education, drama, and nursing counselling, claiming their duoethnographies have lead them to become more aware, dialogic, imaginative, and relational in their practice and research. As such we have found that engaging in this trioethnographic process has allowed us to trace how we came to our current understandings of “editing” theses as well as become more aware of our emerging, dynamic academic identities.

### Framing our Discussions: An Emerging Philosophy for Writing Support

Researching how writing is taught and learned across diverse contexts is a core interest which has sustained our relationship for nearly 10 years. Antoinette’s doctoral dissertation (1994) focused on how French Immersion teachers operationalized a process approach to writing instruction in elementary school; some of her more recent research has explored internationally educated teachers’ experiences in graduate and teacher preparation programs. James’ dissertation (2015) explored plurilingual EAL scholars’ experiences writing research articles for publication. Megan’s dissertation (2016) focused on the ways writing centres work with plurilingual EAL students in increasingly plurilingual academies.

The three of us have had many discussions about writing support over the years. Our conversations have often touched on topics of common interest such as the ethics of particular policies and pedagogies as enacted (or not) at OISE and across the University of Toronto. Moreover, all of us not only have extensive experience supporting plurilingual EAL scholars’ research writing, but also in engaging with the laborious process of writing research in an additional language (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2015; Canagarajah, 2013; Hanauer & Englander, 2011), which we admit influences our perspectives. Although we have worked together closely, we have had different responsibilities and played various roles in terms of providing writing support to graduate students. We share our diverse experiences through dialogues, or multimodal, three-way conversations, in which we invite readers to engage and consider connections to their own

contexts as well as implications for their own practices and policies in supporting emerging plurilingual EAL scholars in post-secondary environments.

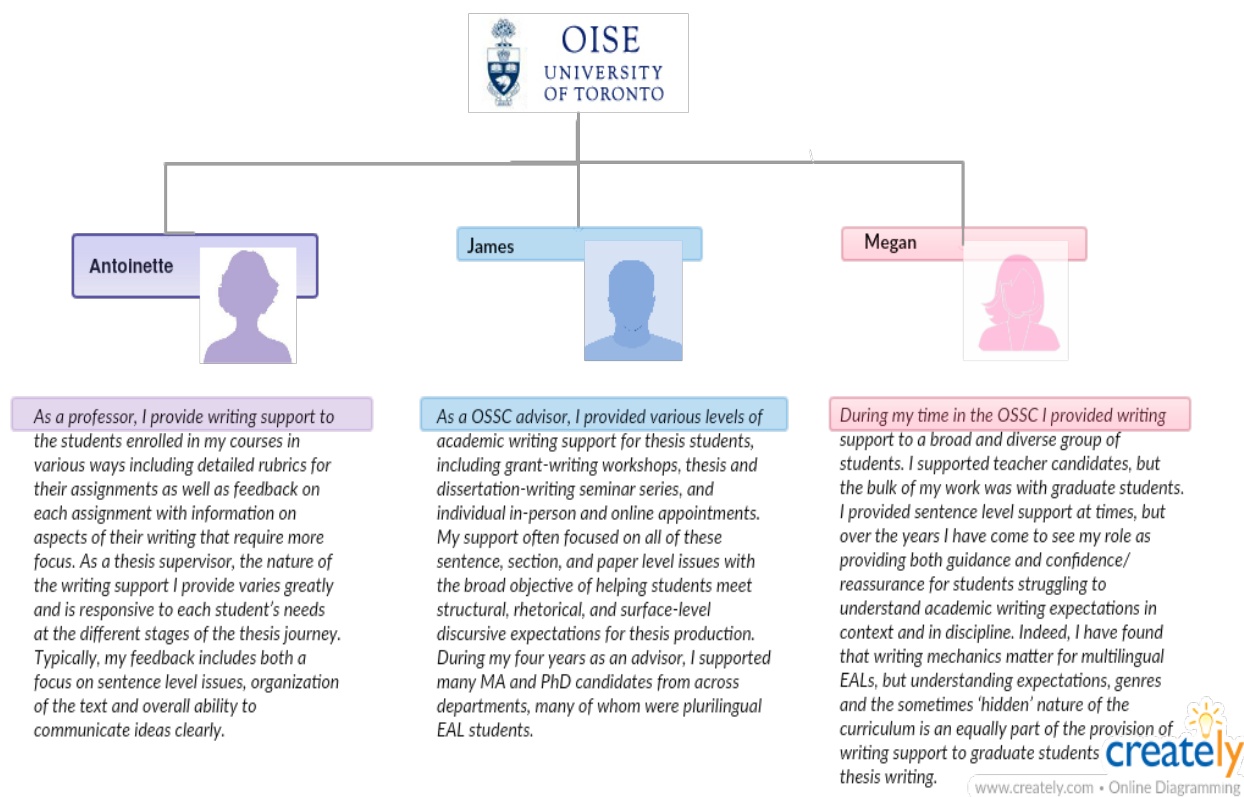


Figure 2. Our Roles Providing Thesis Writing Support

Although we come to our work with plurilingual graduate students from different locations, our intersecting experiences have led us to a shared philosophy for plurilingual EAL writing support that is humanistic, critical, and yet pragmatic. This approach to understanding phenomena associated with post-secondary academic writing is inspired by a critical academic literacies lens that sees language as a meaning-making cultural tool that shapes and is shaped by social, political, and historical contexts of use. Drawing on theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991) and educational scholars such as Jim Cummins (2001), our approach is very much focused on issues of power, legitimacy, and identity. Our philosophy is also humanistic as it holds central not only the macro relations of power shaped by and through this writing, but also the lived experiences of scholars as they engage in this meaning-making. In

the case of academic writing, this approach is not “pie in the sky” pedagogy and policy, however, and is very much pragmatically focused on providing the conditions for plurilingual EAL scholars to achieve their linguistic and academic objectives.

This article was shaped by several years of collaborative work at the OISE Student Success Centre as well as a year-long set of conversations (what we dub “trialogues”) carried out via Skype meetings, email chains, and collaborative notes using Google Docs. Trialogues about our intersecting experiences were transcribed and analyzed thematically, with appropriate excerpts interwoven in the article to delineate our voices as professionals working with graduate students in different ways. The recurring themes and issues, particularly those where our perspectives diverged, guided our selection and organization of excerpts. We have embedded references to the literature in our trialogues as appropriate. In the next sections, we provide trialogues related to the most salient aspects of our work with plurilingual EAL graduate students and a conclusion with implications related to our transformed understanding of the nature of academic writing support for plurilingual EAL students as well as policies related to the issue of editing in the academy. Our hope is that our trialogues will open a space for our readers to consider their own experiences working with plurilingual EAL students and begin to imagine ways to work with them to effectively and equitably support their success in the academy.

## **Trialogues**

We have embedded our experiences in trialogues, or conversations over time that highlight recurring issues and tensions. The themes that shaped our conversations include the writing ability of plurilingual EAL graduate students, the support available to them, the place and role of editing and editors in graduate studies, considerations related to the authentic “voice” of the writer, and the ethics of writing centre policies.

### **Admissions, Preparedness and Support**

**Antoinette:** At an admissions meeting to determine to whom offers would be made for our thesis programs, I heard a conversation regarding the writing ability of several applicants. Concern about the potential for increased workload was voiced by a colleague as she thought about a potential thesis student who would be required to write a thesis in his second, third or fourth language. Over the years, several faculty members, including myself, have been concerned about the admissions requirements related to



proficiency in English which do not seem to be a reliable indication of the level of academic English required to be successful in a thesis program. We have witnessed many situations where even high grades on TOEFL, IELTS, or in a university-based English for Academic purposes program do not translate into success in the graduate program. Similarly, even three consecutive years studying in an English-speaking institution does not guarantee the required level of English to write a thesis independently.

**James:** Antoinette, I can imagine it would be difficult to judge whether such students are capable of achieving satisfactory writing outcomes when being considered for admission. Having gone through the arduous process myself, I can see that thesis writing is challenging for all those attempting it, regardless of their L1 (Casanave, 2014; Hyland, 2016). I have come to view thesis writing as a distinct literacy practice, one socially-situated (Lillis, 2013; Starke-Meyerring, 2011) and with its own genre- and discipline-specific codes and conventions (Aitchison, Kamler & Lee, 2010; Simpson & Matsuda, 2008; Swales & Feak, 2012). It is difficult to measure students' potential or capability of tackling such an enormous task by traditional admissions requirements, particularly when the academic learning trajectory or socialization spans over several years (Okuda & Anderson, 2017).

**Megan:** Antoinette, in my recent doctoral study, plurilingual EAL writers and their advisors suggested admissions policies that rely on TOEFL or IELTS scores do not accurately measure the writing ability required by graduate programs. Moreover, as you suggest, James, the contextual and disciplinary nature of writing that students are asked to undertake require far more than English writing proficiency as graduate writers often come to writing centres due to lack of clarity around what constitutes "good" writing in this new context. While illuminating the hidden expectations of academic writing may help, the ability to explain features of good writing is challenging and may even evade faculty (Lea & Street, 1998).

**Antoinette:** You both point to the need for faculty to consider approaches for supporting plurilingual EAL students navigating writing in graduate programs including the creation of forums for discussions among faculty about feedback practices for plurilingual EAL writers (Séror, 2009). One such discussion was undertaken at a recent faculty meeting: a senior colleague was invited by the chair to share his knowledge by presenting a PowerPoint about how to support writing development among linguistically and culturally diverse master's students. His suggestions were excellent and reflected the most up-to-date research on teaching writing across the disciplines. However, this presentation was the last item on the agenda, and to my regret, many of my colleagues left as they did not feel that the topic was pertinent to their work with graduate students.

**James:** Antoinette, I think you point to a reality that I have encountered wherein faculty support for plurilingual EAL thesis students' writing at OISE and the University of Toronto is uneven at best. As a writing tutor, I often found that students were unsure as to their supervisors' or instructors' expectations for their academic writing. In addition to one-on-one support over the course of the 2014-15 academic year, I ran bi-weekly thesis writing group workshops. These sessions were attended by students of varying academic English writing proficiency, including many plurilingual EAL writers. Following such sessions—focused on everything from managing the supervisor-supervisee relationship to section by section content expectations for theses—students reported increased confidence in navigating the thesis production process. Providing this type of ongoing, institutional support could be a way of providing the genre-specific writing support broadly required by all research degree-seeking graduate students, including plurilingual EAL students (Grav & Cayley, 2015). However, such support may be insufficient in addressing plurilingual EAL students' language-specific needs, including surface-level ones that impede clarity of expression. This is where individual writing support provided by language literacy brokers with L2 writing expertise could be particularly beneficial, especially if done in collaboration with thesis supervisors. Rather than viewing this as a “deficit” approach, I see this as an equity measure aimed at providing the conditions for plurilingual EAL students to better develop academic literacies (Badenhorst, Maloney, Rosales, Dyer & Ru, 2015).

**Megan:** James, as you suggest deficit discourses often circulate around student writing and support in academia (Hallett, 2010; Graves, 2016; Lea & Street 1998; Turner, 2011). Such discourses often imply writing is easily “fixed” at the surface level, which acts to overlook the complexity of academic writing. Secondly, such discourses often implicitly posit that students simply need to learn generic writing skills in places such as writing centres whilst faculty are content experts who are in place to “teach the subject” (Barkas, 2011, p. 280) rather than engage in remedial-type writing support. Perhaps this provides some insight into why some faculty may not see the provision of writing support for plurilingual EAL students as pertinent to faculty work, Antoinette, and send students to writing centres to “learn how to write” or have unclear writing “tidied up,” which obscures the need for writing support to be embedded across the curriculum.

**Antoinette:** I have attempted to bridge this gap and weave writing into the curriculum in a course required for thesis-track students where I have found it necessary to develop drafts of very detailed checklists or rubrics to help students learn about various aspects of the research process. I invite my graduate students to comment on these to further heighten their awareness of the requirements of writing in different genres (Maher & Say, 2016; Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). To date, my experience suggests that

these rubrics and checklists benefit all students, but in particular, plurilingual EAL students who may not be as familiar with these academic writing genres. These students report feeling much more confident working with a clear sense of my expectations (Gourlay, 2009).

**James:** I have also employed similar strategies when working with MA thesis students, Antoinette. I have found that scaffolded approaches are effective in influencing greater awareness and understanding of genre-specific writing expectations for theses. From working with dozens of these plurilingual EAL thesis students across disciplines, it is surprising to note the lack of explicit guidance provided to these students. Another aspect of this instruction that appears crucial is suggesting how to employ different academic and linguistic resources when producing this writing (Buell, 2016; Curry & Lillis, 2013; Swales & Feak, 2012). These resources include both electronic ones such as websites (e.g., Purdue OWL; Thesis Whisperer; Google Scholar) as well as language (e.g., English language writing support specialist) and academic (e.g., disciplinary experts such as supervisors or colleagues) literacy brokers. Providing this type of support bodes well, in my view, for not only meeting the short-term expectations for thesis writing production but also longer term, sustainable writing of discipline-specific academic sub-genres including thesis writing, book reviews, lab reports, etc.

**Megan:** I think what you have both identified through rubrics, explicit conversations, scaffolding and modelling, and ongoing interactions with a number of literacy brokers are extremely important to help all students navigate the expectations of research writing. However, for plurilingual EAL writers the issue of linguistic accuracy is a recurring one. Indeed, several studies from the writing centre context suggest that these graduate students certainly require explicit discipline-focused writing support, yet they also require and value intensive sentence-level correction support when producing theses and academic writing for publication (Luo & Hyland, 2016; Okuda & Anderson, 2017; Phillips, 2013; Wang, 2012). Indeed, even if plurilingual EAL writers master the disciplinary-specific aspect of writing, sentence-level revision is often still necessary. However, there are few (if any) spaces for graduate students—both those using English as a first or additional language—to seek out reliable editing support within the academy.

## Literacy Brokering

**Antoinette:** The final agenda item at most program meetings is reserved to discuss students who we consider “at risk.” One of my colleagues described his struggles with a thesis student whose initial drafts were difficult to comprehend because of the high number of “errors.” My colleague explained that he had attempted to rewrite key passages for this graduate student as well as provide copious feedback. He went

on to explain that whenever the student returned with a new draft, the same errors recurred and the level of comprehensibility had not improved. As a faculty, we shared strategies but agreed that perhaps, it was time to suggest that the student enlist the support of an editor. After several such discussions over a period of several years, during which the number of plurilingual EAL students increased, there is agreement that many of our students would benefit from working with an editor.

**Megan:** Antoinette, I agree that there is a need for editing support among graduate students, which some writing centre scholars are also beginning to illuminate (see for example Grimm, 2009; Philips, 2013; Wang, 2012). However, the use of editors among students still seems like a taboo subject in academia. Indeed, I was speaking to a former colleague who works in higher education administration in the US and casually mentioned that I was editing a doctoral comprehensive exam on a private and for-profit basis. In a very well-meaning way the colleague suggested that I should check the academic integrity policies of the institution from which the student came. I told my colleague that the guiding document for the doctoral exam I was editing suggested students could use an editor for grammatical support. My colleague was shocked and shared with me that he regularly told students using an editor was akin to plagiarism in his institution, a position that may propel writing centres towards their emphatic “no editing” discourse (Clark, 2001; Starke-Meyerring, Paré, Sun & El Bezre, 2014).

**James:** From my experience across institutions and departments I find there is widespread disagreement about how editing should be done and who should be doing it. It is no wonder that students are often unclear about regulations. For many of these students, finding appropriate editing support is often an issue of not only academic integrity but also equity (Corcoran, 2017; Okuda & Anderson, 2017). When thesis students are not able to get the support they need, they face the potential financial burden of a program extension as they struggle to produce writing to the satisfaction of their thesis committee. This is definitely a polemic issue that is in need of greater discussion. I think there is a strong ethical and pedagogical argument that can be made for employing editors (and other language literacy brokers such as writing centre instructors) as part of a developing network of those “involved in English-medium text production, including friends, editors, reviewers, academic peers, and translators” (Lillis & Curry, 2010, p. 87). In terms of academic integrity, these policies should be prepared in recognition of knowledge production and writing processes that incorporate feedback from multiple sources (Harwood, Austin & Macauley, 2012; Kim, 2016).

**Antoinette:** The notion of employing multiple language literacy brokers to support the writing process reminds me of my experience working with Ming, a student from China for whom English is a third

language. She had designed a strong thesis proposal with novel data collection strategies. She and I met frequently to discuss her progress as well as the exciting themes emerging from her research. Ming submitted one chapter of her thesis at a time for review as she had imposed a strict timeline on herself for completion of her degree. I focused my feedback on the content more than the language when responding to her early drafts. I also drew her attention to key errors that impeded comprehension as well as error types that I wanted her to work on such as the use of articles and the consistent use of tenses. When Ming began to submit portions of her next draft, I realized that I needed to turn my attention to recurring errors of varying types. After fully editing one chapter, I knew I would not be able to do this level of editing for the remaining chapters. Because Ming is a teacher herself and wanted to get as much from the thesis journey as possible, I invited another more senior doctoral candidate who is a strong writer to work with Ming. They agreed to meet every few days for a couple of hours to go over each chapter. After each meeting with her peer editor, Ming made the required changes before working on a new chapter. The outcome was a strong, mostly error-free thesis, and two graduate students who mutually benefited and grew as a result of this experience.

**James:** I think the use of a peer mentor in terms of producing thesis writing is an excellent idea. This could reduce the burden on the supervisor and provide learning opportunities for both the mentor and mentee, though I would suggest there is a greater benefit when both share particular (sub) disciplinary backgrounds. This type of peer mentorship happens at the OSSC, where senior graduate student mentors from the field of Education work with (often but not always) more novice students from the same field on their manuscripts.

**Megan:** I agree with you both on the value of experienced peers providing academic writing support. However, I have struggled with this in the purview of the writing centre where time and resource constraints (for both students and the writing centre) are perennial issues. For example, in my third year at the OSSC I met Sabha who came in from time-to-time with chapters of his thesis that his supervisor encouraged him to have “polished,” which was at odds with my instructional approach. While I tried to engage Sabha in the revision process throughout, he disengaged, told me he did not know how to revise the enduring errors I pointed out, and simply wanted the thesis fixed. While Sabha is not the typical student who visits the OSSC, most are engaged and do want to learn and improve, after several appointments with Sabha I wondered how “instructional” sessions are when the student is simply too overwhelmed, on a deadline, or altogether uninterested in learning. I also wondered how I could help Sabha to see writing as more than grammar and mechanics, and the OSSC as more than a “housekeeping” service (Turner, 2011, p.

33) to tidy up these features of writing if he was sent there for that very purpose by his supervisor. In this case, I questioned how effective or sustainable the teachable moments I sought to provide in the OSSC space were.

**James:** My experiences with students at the OSSC included practices where I would focus on (and at times heavily direct edit) very small sections of theses in the hopes that student uptake of such feedback would then lead to them applying this learning to the thesis as a whole (Williams & Severino, 2004). However, as you suggest, Megan, the unfortunate reality is that these appointments are rarely long enough to address the myriad issues facing these emerging scholars. I think the notion of various levels of support—including peer mentors and individual writing centre support from senior graduate students with broad knowledge and experience working with L2 writers—could/should be addressed at the departmental and institutional levels. However, I wonder about how heavy a hand such mentors should take when attempting to meet the expectations of the thesis supervisors while also providing the conditions for the emerging scholar to develop sustainable academic writing practices? Doesn't too much direct editing potentially take away from the emerging scholar's "voice"?

Whose "voice"?

**Antoinette:** Preserving the author's voice<sup>2</sup>, in this case the voice of the graduate researcher, is often a challenge when the feedback and editing processes begin (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Belcher, 2007; Nelson & Castelló, 2012). The case of Francis, a plurilingual EAL doctoral candidate is an example of the challenges involved in supporting the development of academic identity and authorial voice. When I began to work with Francis, he had decided on a research topic outside of his area of expertise and invested hundreds of hours reading and exploring in order to be able to conduct the study. In fact, he became so invested in his new topic, that he saw possible links between everything and his topic. As a result, his first thesis draft was quite different from what he had initially proposed. Although his understanding of the field was strong, his writing skills were not strong enough to deal with the complexity of the ideas and lenses he wanted to weave into his thesis. My feedback initially focused on his ideas but as additional drafts became more complex, I had difficulty understanding the meaning of a number of passages. As a result, I asked him to begin working with an editor who could point out grammatical trouble spots and help him reformulate passages that were not comprehensible. As time and cost became issues, it was necessary to adopt a less dialogic process in which the editor made changes to the text without consultation with Francis. The final outcome was mostly positive for the student as the thesis was much improved and generally

comprehensible. However, Francis felt that he had lost some of his “authentic” authorial voice in the final product.

**Megan:** Antoinette, your experience with Francis reminds me of a student I met in my second year working in the OSSC. Andrés was an international doctoral student who was struggling to work through a particularly complex chapter of his dissertation, yet his supervisor would not provide feedback until it was edited for language errors. I spent many sessions with Andrés the first month of the term clarifying meaning and working through the language in the chapter but it was a long process as I could not simply ‘edit’ the chapter following OSSC guidelines. As the semester continued, appointments in the OSSC became difficult to come by and I did not see Andrés for several weeks. Andrés returned one day well past the deadline he had been trying to meet with the same chapter and it was now written in perfectly clean, standard English. However, the chapter’s tone had changed considerably as all of the first-person narratives that had privileged Andrés’ distinctive voice were removed. The editor Andrés paid did not appear to have disciplinary knowledge and following the revisions his supervisor suggested the chapter was now too general, not academic enough and lacked necessary authorial voice. Andrés could not afford any more external support. I booked Andrés in for nearly all of my remaining openings in the OSSC that year. Andrés and I spent several months working through the original draft, painstakingly negotiating effective and accurate expression of his authorial voice. The chapter was accepted nearly a year after his intended deadline.

**James:** You have both pointed out the ways that editing done in a less dialogical way can engender benefits as well as drawbacks. I worked with a student, Derek, who was racing against time to finish his dissertation writing and because of his impending deadline, was often willing to accept direct suggestions for re-writing passages—usually only one clause or sentence but sometimes a short paragraph—of his thesis. At times, I was uncomfortable providing such feedback, potentially compromising the integrity of his work or adversely impacting the development of his academic identity. Should I have avoided providing this type of feedback for Derek? I remain unsure.

Working with Derek was a learning process for me. What I have learned since this experience is that both writing tutors and plurilingual EAL writers have differing levels of comfort with particular tutoring processes, including particular types of editing. However, never have I encountered a student who was uncomfortable with direct correction of surface-level errors, an issue that, at times, produces a level of unintelligibility or communicative ambiguity frustrating and/or unacceptable to supervisors. Through my writing support experiences, I have realized that a combination of language and academic literacy brokers

can have a very positive impact on L2 writers if they work together in a transparent, collaborative way. Alternatively, serious tensions may arise if any of those literacy brokers involved in the process are perceived to have overstepped their bounds (Willey & Tanimoto, 2013), which may be particularly challenging when a student is involved in producing a thesis or dissertation (Buell, 2016).

## Writing Centre Policies and the Realities of Plurilingual EAL Graduate Students

**Antoinette:** I referred Matteo to our faculty writing centre as well as the University graduate writing service as he was struggling with a number of issues related to academic writing. He embraced the services wholeheartedly and showed improvement in some areas. However, he was not always able to get an individual appointment or a space in workshops and mini-courses because they were so popular that spaces filled up very quickly. Matteo reported that even when he could get an individual appointment, the advisor would not be able to help him edit his work because it was against the policy of the writing centre. He came to me to find out if I could recommend an editor who did not charge too much as he was aware that he did not yet have the skills to edit his work himself. By the end of his program, he told me that he had spent a couple of thousand dollars on editing services. He explained that he felt compelled to use an editor because his country had sponsored his graduate studies and would revoke his scholarship if he did not maintain high grades in his courses and full-time status in the program.

**Megan:** Antoinette, as you note, the moratorium on editing has, and continues to be, a feature of many writing centres. However, a recent development at the University of Alberta, where copy-editing is provided to graduate students for thesis writing at a reasonable cost, is beginning to challenge the widespread refusal to provide editing support (Waldman, 2015). Despite this, at a recent writing centre conference the conversation circled around the problematic nature of the editing request from students and writing centres' strong resolve not to edit. The colleague seated beside me mentioned (with trepidation) that his institution provided such an editing service—that was not attached to the writing centre—at a small fee for students. Many of the writing centre administrators in attendance were very unhappy to hear this, felt that it attacked the central premise of writing centre work, and discussed strategies that this colleague could take to have his institution cancel the editing service.

**James:** Having worked in several writing centres across the University of Toronto, I have noticed that in general writing tutors are not allowed to directly edit student work as this would be a contravention of academic integrity policies and/or compromise the pedagogical potential of writing instruction. Although no students have ever confided in me that they employed outside copy editing help, both of you have



suggested that this is not an uncommon practice for plurilingual EAL students when attempting to meet thesis writing expectations. Again, I understand the desire on the part of writing instructors/tutors to place the intellectual burden on the student themselves without too much interference from outside sources. I recently had an experience with a colleague who produced what was, in my opinion, a sub-standard thesis full of ineffective writing that obscured clarity and potentially demonstrated a lack of content knowledge. I eventually recused myself from the copy editing I was doing on his behalf as I felt he should be doing this work himself, regardless of how long it took. However, I was torn by this decision as I also understood that he was under significant financial stress and would benefit greatly from simply being done with his Ph.D. This is a very grey area.

I also understand the pedagogical impetus behind policies that suggest providing less direct editing in order to stimulate gradual student progress through self-editing practice over time. This type of pedagogical practice is important in providing emerging scholars with the tools to become more independent and self-sufficient as (English language) research writers (Simpson, Caplan, Cox & Phillips, 2016). However, I feel that when a student is in a position where they may not benefit from more time spent editing content in order to produce clarity, they should be provided with potential trustworthy resources for editing their work accordingly. After all, as Megan said, is not incorporation of feedback from various language literacy brokers part of many senior academics' successful writing practices? I find myself at odds here with my critical, humanistic approach which suggests the primacy of developing or providing the conditions for student development of academic literacy skills (like self-editing) while developing (and negotiating) academic identity and authorial voice (Badenhorst et al. 2015; Nelson & Castelló, 2012; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Ivaniç & Camps, 2001).

**Antoinette:** Like you, James, I am torn about which policy direction to move toward. On the one hand, I understand the more conservative viewpoint that to earn a research degree, a graduate student should do the work involved in developing a well-written thesis. However, like Megan, I have come to understand the research writing process as a collaborative one where various literacy brokers may play a valuable role (Harwood, Austin & McCauley, 2012; Luo & Hyland, 2016; Wiley & Tanimoto, 2013)

**Megan:** I feel trepidation about non-instructional editing where the tendency is for the student's voice or ownership to be usurped. However, I am keenly aware of the high-stakes nature of academic writing in higher education as the primary form of assessment. I also feel that it is necessary to thoughtfully reflect on the way minimizing the importance of editing and proofreading may act to exclude, marginalize and further mark some students as deficient, including plurilingual EAL writers, while simultaneously privileging those

who already know and are able to produce texts that meet the requirements of standard edited English (Grimm, 1999; Heng-Hartse & Kubota, 2014). Moreover, while I agree that the instructional approach to editing certainly seems well-suited to writing centres operating in higher education environments, the defensive approach these spaces take to requests for editing and proofreading may not be fully in service of producing teachable moments for students. Rather, the consistency with which writing centres refuse to edit may more often be in service to the institutions they serve and centres' desires to assuage long held concerns that the collaborative pedagogy of writing centres is one that borders on plagiarism (Burlaga & Costino, 2003). Moreover, in selective institutions, those spaces that are most often called upon to undertake the remedial tidying up of work deemed below institutional expectations may face a perilous, marginalized existence should they advertise (or even admit) to undertaking such work. Yet as plurilingualism becomes the norm, not the exception, perhaps it is time that higher education institutions consider how "a strict no editing, no proofreading policy can be exclusionary to certain groups" (Babcock, 2008, p. 63), including increasingly plurilingual EAL student populations (Okuda & Anderson, 2017). I think it is necessary to consider particular forms of editing (structural; stylistic; copy) as support that students have a right to request, and the lack of provision of such support often results in students seeking out this support elsewhere where it may be of uneven quality, costly and non-instructional.

## **Tensions, Discomfort and an Ethical Imperative**

This trioethnographic piece has provided a window into our intersecting experiences with providing academic writing support by some, arguably, unconventional means. Relating these experiences has raised the spectre of tensions between institutional policies and individual practices in providing thesis writing support for plurilingual EAL students. Our individual understandings were transformed through our dialogues as we moved towards a shared recognition that sustained thesis writing support for plurilingual EAL students should include particular forms of editing—structural, stylistic, copy—provided by different types of literacy brokers that are often explicitly or implicitly discouraged among those responsible for supporting graduate research writers. While we still hold subtly different positions on how such targeted writing support may be most effectively delivered to plurilingual EAL graduate research writers, we also came to shared positions that i) providing targeted plurilingual EAL research writing support is an urgent, ethical imperative; and ii) such support could be useful to all students, not only those using English as an additional language.

What is abundantly clear following our uncomfortable, yet necessary, conversations is that unresolved questions remain: Given the potential financial burden of program extension due to thesis writing—something that is often an issue for plurilingual EAL students as they struggle to produce this writing to the satisfaction of their committees—should departments consider providing a list of vetted editors for thesis students to consult during the production of their manuscripts? Should institutions and writing centres reconsider strict policies forbidding different types of editing? Should there be broader discussion among writing specialists about the boundaries between different forms of editing (e.g. stylistic versus re-writing)? Should institutions provide greater, more integrated support for plurilingual EAL writers that transparently draws on the expertise of both academic (supervisors) *and* language (writing centre tutors) literacy brokers? Should gatekeepers and literacy brokers (re)consider their research writing support/adjudication practices in light of emerging understandings of the complexity and diversity of non-dominant Englishes? Our answers to these questions are all in the affirmative, suggesting a need for institutional and departmental policies and practices that cast aside narrow epistemologies and stale ideologies of editing. Assuming such a progressive, pluralized stance will undoubtedly be an uncomfortable task requiring the questioning of normalized institutional discourses and entrenched ideologies surrounding academic integrity and knowledge production (Bennett, 2017; Heng-Hartse & Kubota, 2014; Starke-Meyerring, Paré, Sun & El Bezre, 2014). However, the result could be more effective, efficient, and equitable support for plurilingual EAL writers that provides the conditions for achieving sustainable research writing outcomes. To that end, we present the following recommendations based on our discussions:

#### Thesis Supervisors

- Provide direct editing (structural; stylistic; copy) for instructional purposes
- Encourage students to build/access networks of language literacy brokers (e.g., writing centre experts) and academic literacy brokers (e.g. other disciplinary experts or colleagues in the same program)
- Recognize plurilingual EAL scholars' language practices (e.g. use of non-dominant varieties of English) as legitimate and tied to their evolving scholarly identities

#### Support Centres

- Adapt policies to focus on instructional editing rather than espousing a “we do not edit” policy
- Make available tutors/staff who can effectively attend to plurilingual EAL students' research writing needs
- Provide a list of reasonably- priced and vetted editorial services within and outside the university

#### Departments/Institutions

- Make time and space for discussions regarding the ethics of “editing,” the nature of knowledge production and implications for policies of academic integrity
- Ensure widespread knowledge of available resources for supervisors and graduate students
- Encourage the integration of language learning and development with content in all courses and disciplines to support increasingly plurilingual student bodies

We conclude this trioethnographic piece with a call for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to critically reflect upon the ethical imperative of providing effective, equitable research writing support to an ever-increasing population of plurilingual EAL writers at English-medium universities. Such reflection should be conducted in light of the enormous burden of research writing, one potentially exacerbated by policies and pedagogies that do not adequately consider the needs of *all* our emerging scholars.

## Endnotes

1. At OISE, the OSSC serves a diverse student body, including those labeled “native” and “non-native” English speakers. While we find such binary terminology problematic, our discussion of writing support in this article is largely focused on those using English as an additional language (EAL), or what we refer to as plurilingual students. Plurilingual is also a problematic term as it could refer to those able to balance several languages or academic literacies, including those who are English L1 users. Therefore, we choose to use “plurilingual EAL” as the terminology in order to denote both the multicompetence of such language users while also alluding to their unique position as graduate student writers.
2. We recognize that authorial “voice” and academic “identity” are contested, dynamic, and fluid concepts. We use voice in this paper when considering the particular affective positions of plurilingual EAL writers as they construct and negotiate their academic identities with different literacy brokers during thesis production and revision.

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