recently went into one of my English language classes in Nairobi, where the sixteen-year-olds before me were candidates for the Cambridge-based International General Certificate of Secondary Education. They had only two school terms before they would sit for their final exams in June of 2007. The class was lively, but I settled them down quickly and told them that we were going to have a fun activity. That got their attention.

I had cut a picture for each of them from a 2001 Time magazine, intending to inspire creative writing. I was eager to see their surprised faces. Still, I held back my comments a bit just so that I could savour the big moment. When the students opened their books, all I saw was excitement. “Damn! I’m good!” I told myself. Because they had responded so well to my surprise, I decided to give them some “talk-time,” time when they could talk to anyone in class (except me) about their pictures. “What picture did you get?” one girl excitedly asked as she offered her own for viewing. The setting of the photograph was an almost-bare room. In the foreground, a simply dressed young woman sat in a weather-beaten chair and cradled a baby. In the background, in tattered clothes, a child with half-shut eyes was lying on a couch. “She’ll make a good story out of that,” I said to myself as I walked around the room.

I looked at more pictures, perhaps with more excitement than the students themselves showed. One student asked whether I was going to let the class do poetry based on the pictures or perhaps compose diary entries. “Anything you want,” I answered. “Just make sure that the final product is creative and thoughtful.”

This was a Thursday, and I was happy that during the coming weekend I would sit down not only to mark but also to enjoy some really great writing. Surely, if the students enjoyed their work to the extent that I saw in class, then half the battle had already been won. Come that weekend, though, I could not believe the results.

A Lesson for the Teacher

“This was such a good picture,” I thought as I looked at one of the pictures. In this one, a sweaty, barefooted Arab boy was pulling a coconut-laden cart. In the background another boy was walking in the opposite direction; one of his hands was resting on a cart, his palm over a coconut. “There is tension in this picture, a story,” I told myself. The disappointment that I was dealing with resulted from the contrast in the students’ liveliness upon receiving the assignment and the lack of vivacity in their stories.

For this assignment, I had wanted my students’ stories to breathe and dance with the joy that their spoken language did. What I realized as I looked at my students’ work, however, was that the freedom that they have in spoken language is a result of their ability to think and switch from one language to the
other and to break rules of syntax in one as they concurrently obey those of the other language, or those of their own informal language.

Kenya’s Diverse Linguistic Landscape

The Kenyan informal language that students use is called “Sheng,” a mixture of Swahili and English, just like Spanglish, a mixture of Spanish and English. However, the linguistic landscape in Kenya and in many other African countries is so diversified that it does not allow for such a dichotomy. As such, Sheng is really a combination of several languages that one finds in Kenya—the country has forty-two tribal languages—and it has variant forms depending upon what part of Nairobi one is in.

I’ve focused on Nairobi because it is the place that sets the pace and trends of Sheng for the rest of the country. Many of the youth in other parts of the country want to speak as the youth in Nairobi do because they believe that Nairobi young people are “more cool.” The Nairobi youth, in fact, call themselves wasee wa Nai or mabeshte, the latter a derivative from the English word best.

Sheng, like any other dynamic language, is growing and changing all the time. These days, for example, young ladies are called mamanzi (plural) and manzi (singular). In my youth, though, they were called chiles (plural) or chile (singular). If any of my students read this, they will think that I am very old because the term has mutated many times over the years—to dame, and then for a brief while, thanks to the Kikuyu influence, to kacugwa.

Rails for Language

Since that weekend, when I tried to identify reasons for the lifeless language of my students’ stories, I have listened carefully as students talk and have come to yet another realization: my students’ spoken language performance, while it may be breaking formal rules, is guided by other rules.

Yes, even in the seeming disorder of the blended spoken language, there is order. Compare it to a train that is going in a given direction, and while it is going on a particular rail, its direction and position are guided by the rails. When the train switches from one rail to another, the direction and position are now guided by the new rail system. The difference between this example of the train and the students’ use of language is that the rails of language are more flexible: the train rails are rigid metal, but the language rails are more like rubber tubes. To extend the comparison: the more informal the language, the more flexible the rails.

Looking back at my lesson, the one with the photographs that I’d hoped would inspire imaginative, lively writing, I now wonder what would have happened had I allowed my excited students to write their stories in language of their choice, including Sheng. The syllabus that I teach doesn’t allow such freedom, but the possibility has led me to think more seriously about my role as a teacher in multi-lingual Africa.

I see now that the difference between the living, dancing spoken language and the students’ stiff written language can be found in the analogy of the rails: the difference lies in flexibility. It seems to me that in all curricular areas we can help students infuse energy in their writing—and learning—if we are willing to change, to search for ways that allow students to express their thoughts in voices that are their own. As a teacher in an ever-changing global classroom, I believe that the need for such flexibility has never been more important.

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